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十二国記

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*Kaze no Umi, Meikyuu no Kishi*

*Sea of The Wind, Shore of The Maze*

**Volume 2**

*By Fuyumi Ono*

# Chapter 7

"Taiki, you can leave the palace today."

The summer solstice had actually passed some time ago, but it wasn't until now that Teiei spoke these words.

The day had finally arrived. Taiki put down the chopsticks with which he was using to eat breakfast.

"Yes..."

He had gotten up earlier this morning than usual, and even the clothes that Sanshi had prepared for him were all much more ornate than usual. Taiki had already mentally prepared himself for this.

Youka patted his back gently. "You don't have to be this nervous."

"Youka, will you accompany me when I go?"

Youka smiled. "Yes. I'll also be by your side the whole time."

"What about Sanshi?" Taiki had a feeling that she would say no.

Teiei nodded and her answer wasn't far from the one he wanted to hear. "Of course Sanshi will come with you. Except, Sanshi has to hide herself. You might not be able to see her, but she'll definitely be nearby."

Taiki heaved a disappointed sigh. If Sanshi had to hide nearby, that meant that when the time came, she wouldn't be holding his hand, not to mention that she wouldn't be able to gently stroke his back.

"I understand..."

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Teiei and Youka were in the front, followed by over ten ceremonial nyosen, and Taiki was in the middle as they walked onto the small paths, all the way to the gate of Houro Palace without stopping.

The nyosen in front of him took down the bolt of the door.

Before the door was opened, Taiki remembered the vast wilderness that was

the exterior of the maze, but after the door was opened, the scene outside had underwent a complete change.

The towering crags stretched out in layers, creating waves upon waves of green, and between these rocks was an expansive grassland, upon which there was a flood of colors. Tents had been pitched one after another, and countless flags had been raised everywhere. Fences had been built with stakes to which horses and unusual animals had been tied, and on which harnesses and cloths had been hung to dry. Not to mention that there was a variety of people, dressed in a variety of styles.

Just like this, a busy little village had appeared.

Taiki began to feel apprehensive and couldn't help but grab Teiei's hand.

"There is no need to be afraid. Would you like to adjust your breathing?"

Taiki used his eyes to express consent and then straightened his chest even more and took a deep breath.

Teiei held his hand and prepared to walk forward. A man at a nearby tent saw this and kneeled down to bow. This movement spread outward like a ripple, as the people scattered about the grass in discussion all kneeled down to bow.

Taiki tightened his grip on Teiei's hand, as he looked straight ahead at the quivering hairpins on the heads of the nyosen walking in front of him, hoping to rely on this to shake off the torment of being stared at by innumerable eyes.

"Are you still all right?" asked Youka's gentle voice from behind.

"Yes... Can we speak?"

"Yes, there's no need to be so shy."

"Okay."

The ceremony seemed not to be as difficult as he had thought it was going to be. At this, he heaved a sigh of relief.

"Is this all the people?"

Teiei replied, "No, only half of them have come first."

"Oh, good..."

When he looked around, he saw a great many people wearing armor. There were many very young people and a lot of old people as well, and there were numerous men, but also lots of women.

"I didn't think there would be so many women here."

Teiei smiled, but her smile was not as natural as it usually was, as if she were suppressing her emotions. It was probably because Teiei was also very nervous, but just had a different way of expressing it.

"Well, of course... would you rather serve under a king or a queen?"

"I don't know."

The road from the great gate to Hoto Palace was paved with stones. Many adults had gathered on either side of the road, kneeling down with their heads lowered. This sort of scene looked unnatural.

"Why is everyone bowing?"

"They are paying their respects to you." Teiei knew that had she used the word "status" to explain it to Taiki, he probably wouldn't understand, so she stopped herself from using it.

"Should I greet them?"

"You do not need to right now. If you wish to speak to someone, you can invite them to stand up."

"Can I chat with them?"

"You may after the incense ceremony. Then, you can ask them whatever you want."

"There are a lot of big animals here..."

"Those are youju. Everyone has ridden their youju here."

"Oh..."

Some of the beasts looked like tigers, and others looked like lions, while still

others looked like horses and cows.

"Can youju be subdued too?"

"Youju are caught, and after they're tamed, they go through training. Come, and watch your step.

After we go inside, please remember to bow towards the alter once."

Taiki stopped looking around, turning his eyes forward, and realized that Hoto Palace was right in front of him.

Hoto Palace was not quite like the structures inside Houro Palace, as all four sides had walls, and as soon as he was out of the view of all those people, Taiki was really able to heave a sigh of relief.

The interior of Hoto Palace was both high and spacious, and an altar faced the entrance; it felt a lot like the central hall of a temple.

Taiki did as Teiei said, and after he bowed towards the altar, he walked to the wall and made an incense offering. Then he was taken onto a platform adjacent to the wall on the right side of the room. If this were a Japanese-style room, we could say that the platform was about eight tatami mats wide. It was backed by the wall of the palace, while bamboo blinds hung down on the other three sides. The blinds facing the front had already been pulled up, and inside there was a chair. When sitting on the chair, one could see everything between the entrance to Hoto Palace and the altar.

Taiki sat peacefully in the seat and quietly watched as the nyosen busily offered incense. Suddenly feeling eager eyes gazing upon him, he looked over and realized that many people had gathered at the entrance to Hoto Palace. After the nyosen finished offering incense, a large portion of them came to the platform in succession. When they had all assembled themselves on the platform, the blinds were then lowered. Taiki heaved a sigh.

"You should feel much more relaxed now," said Teiei as she smiled.

"I get really nervous when so many people are staring at me."

"You'll get used to it in no time."

"Can I call Sanshi to come here?"

"Yes, as long as the blinds are down."

After Teiei said this, Taiki called upon Sanshi, and in the blink of an eye, she appeared next to his feet. He laid on her leopard portion as she wrapped her arms around him, making him feel much more at ease. Sanshi comforted Taiki by hugging his head, and Taiki felt that her hands were so warm.

"You look so nervous. But actually, you don't need to be so tense," said Teiei with a smile.

"My mind knows this, but my body isn't listening to its commands... What do I do now?"

"Those who've climbed the mountain will come and offer incense. Before we return, all that is required of you is watch them one by one as they do so. If you become bored with this, you may go outside and chat with the people outside."

When Teiei had finished speaking, there was already a person inside of the palace offering incense.

The movements of this first person to come in were abnormally stiff, and he walked like that up to the altar.

"Taiki, do you feel any ouki?" inquired Teiei next to Taiki's ear. Taiki shook his head, signifying that he didn't know. Teiei understood what meaning Taiki was expressing.

"No matter. If you do feel the ouki, then you can call us to you and whisper it to us."

"Okay..."

The person for whom offering incense was not easy, walked in front of the platform, and after taking a bow, he kneeled down. This man was old enough to be someone's father, and his build was big and fat, like that of a sumo wrestler. Taiki struggled to listen to what the nyosen and the man were talking about by the platform. However, the revelation--up to now, Taiki still wasn't clear on how it would manifest itself--did not seem to come with this man.

Seeing Teiei's expression of inquiry, Taiki shook his head. Nothing strange

happened that could have been the revelation. Taiki quietly watched people entering one after another to offer incense, and after two days, he began to feel bored.

On the fourth day, he finally decided that he wanted to walk around outside.

The offering of incense occurs for only a few hours in the morning. Taiki sat on the platform and watched those offering incense. At first, he had thought that these people who weren't nyosen were very refreshing. Since everyone's appearance and clothes each had their own special traits, it was interesting to see everybody's differences. However, very quickly, he began to feel that sitting in the chair was very bothersome.

He only had to stay until noon before he could return to the palace, but the length of time that he had to sit was too long.

"Can I walk around outside?"

As soon as they heard Taiki ask this, the nyosen on the platform twittered with joy, because they had also felt bored.

"Of course you can," replied Youka with a big smile on her face.

"Were you all just waiting for me to ask this?"

"Not completely," said Youka as she laughed. "However, I can't say that it hasn't been a little annoying, because, since this morning, we've already seen Pumpkin Daibu's face six times."

Though the nyosen tried to suppress their laughter, they were unable to hold it in and began laughing.

Among those who have offered incense, some will do it several times a day. And of those people, the first person to enter the palace and perform the rite on the first day had come every day and offered incense at least ten times before Taiki returned to Houro Palace. That man looked like a daibu from some kingdom, and his face was round and red, like a pumpkin, so they privately gave him the nickname, "Pumpkin Daibu."

"Will it be dangerous for me to go outside?"

Teiei smiled and said, "We'll all be by your side. With this many people, you

shouldn't worry. Even if we did encounter someone up to no good, you can believe that the people in the vicinity will not stand idly by. They will definitely help you out, because everyone wants you to see their best side."

Ten foolish people who had tried to sneak into Houro Palace had already been expelled from Mt. Hou, but none of the nyosen intended to inform Taiki of such a thing.

"I see..."

"When the time comes, a lot of people will surround you and want to greet you, but that would be better than sitting here as if you were doing penance, right? I think for sure that there will be those who are too impatient to wait for a ruler to be chosen, and I'm afraid that you'll eventually you'll be scared by all the flattering."

"Then...what do I say to them?"

"If you find the ruler, then you follow the ancient customs and bow before him..."

"And then I vow never to abandon him, never to disobey his royal command, and pledge my loyalty to him?"

Teiei nodded. "Correct."

"What if they're not the ruler?"

"Since it's the summer solstice right now, it's tradition to say, I wish you well from the solstice until the equinox, or you could say, I wish you well from the equinox until the solstice."

"So I just wish them well until the next Ankou Day."

"Yes."

"What if I can't figure it out and I mess up?"

Teiei smiled and comforted Taiki. "Don't worry. That won't happen."

"Will Sanshi come with me?"

"Sanshi will hide herself nearby. However, you must not call her out when

we're amongst the big crowds. If you do that, she'll frighten the horses and kiju."

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The nyosen on the platform surrounded Taiki, and they all walked towards the outside of the palace.

The nyosen that were not on the platform could only look on with envy, since it was their responsibility to stay in the palace for the whole day and look after the people offering incense, as well as handle the various problems of those who had climbed the mountain.

To those who want to become the ruler, it could be said that the mountain-climbing season is a magnificent ceremony. For the nyosen, it could also be counted as an amusing activity.

Extremely few regret becoming a nyosen, but living such a long time still makes some of them weary. Over the summer solstice, the nyosen spend a lot of time on their appearances, though it wasn't done to convey their dignity. The nyosen teased the men who had climbed the mountain with their affection for fun. While this went on, the playing would sometimes become serious, and it's not unheard of for a nyosen to descend the mountain with a man.

It had not been easy for Taiki to leave the palace, so it was unfortunate that the first person that came to greet him was the aforementioned Pumpkin Daibu. He must have set up his camp near Hoto Palace, so that when Taiki and his group came out of the palace, he could immediately hurry to him with the utmost speed.

It sounded like something heavy had been dropped onto the ground when he kneeled down, and he hit his forehead upon the ground probably because he used too much force as he was preparing to bow. The nyosen tried with all their strength to keep straight faces, but after seeing this, they couldn't contain their laughter anymore, nor could the other people who had gathered around and seen him.

"M...Mt. Hou Kou, you look very pleasant today." Pumpkin Daibu was so nervous that the tone of his voice sounded strange. "I am the Shiba of Sui Province in Tai Kingdom. I am called Rohaku. I...I'm originally from Nan'you County in Ba Province--"

Since he was crouched on the ground and speaking quickly, and also stuttering because he was nervous, Taiki couldn't hear very clearly the flattery that was directed toward him.

"It is an extreme privilege to be able to pay my respects to your honorable self today! I wish the Kou a very long life!"

Taiki didn't know what to do, so he glanced up at Youka. She then raised her eyebrows a little towards him. He understood the meaning in her eyes, and said to the man who was bowing, "I wish you well...until the equinox."

The man immediately looked up, and then his shoulders suddenly drooped.

"...Re-really? I... I see..." said the man, thinking outloud as a dejected expression came to his face.

Youka stifled her laughter and lightly pressed Taiki's back.

"Let's go. Just do as you did as we walk around."

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Taiki was surrounded by a group of nyosen who were looking back at the men again and again as they walked. After a stretch of road, one of the nyosen quietly said to Taiki, "It's a good thing you stopped him from saying more. Who knows how long we would have had to listen to him otherwise!"

"...I couldn't find an opportunity to interrupt."

"Thank goodness he won't become your master, or else he wouldn't have been worthy to serve under."

Seeing the relief on the nyosen's face, Taiki tilted his head and asked, "Was that guy not good?"

"If you discover the revelation, it doesn't matter if the person is good or bad. It's just that it would be too embarrassing for Tai Kingdom if even a pumpkin like that could become the king. Although it isn't too important whether the ruler looks good or not, all people are even a little bit vain. At the very least, the person who becomes the ruler should have a bit of dignity."

"Is...that so?"

Youka smiled and said, "Don't listen to their nonsense. The most important thing is whether or not you receive the revelation."

The other nyosen heard Youka explaining things to Taiki so earnestly yet again and lightly flared up at her. "Come now, Youka. You say that, but from ancient times until now, has an ugly person ever become the ruler?"

"Right, right. That's because a person's dignity can be seen from their appearance. Moreover, those who want to become ruler, whether it's their looks or their personality, must fit with the manner of a ruler."

"When we're out in public, speak a little more quietly," warned Youka softly, and the nyosen immediately stopped talking.

Youka saw this and couldn't help but smile. She bent down and said to Taiki, "Don't mind their idle talk. Your duty is to wait for the appearance of the revelation."

"Okay..."

Many people surrounded Taiki and continuously flattered him, but Taiki didn't feel anything unusual happen.

The number of mountain-climbers, together with all their servants, added up to more than three-hundred people. Besides the masters who had come to see if they could become the ruler, the servants that

followed them also had the opportunity to be chosen the ruler.

There many who saw Taiki and rushed to be near him, but there were also people who saw him and chose not to speak with him since they hadn't planned on going forward and talking with him. The nyosen had also once mentioned to him that even if he didn't talk with the ruler, he would still recognize the ruler's presence. Unfortunately, no sort of revelation showed itself to him.

Regardless of whether it was the people who were talking to him or the people who were not, their eyes were all filled with anticipation. When he thought about the fact there was no way to fulfill the expectations of most of them in the

end, Taiki couldn't help but feel sorrowful.

After getting a break from the crowds, Taiki heaved a sigh. Youka heard it and was concerned, so she tried to gauge his mood.

"Are you tired?"

"No. It's just that meeting so many people in so short a time..."

"It's already past noon. Would you like to return to Hoto Palace? You probably want to rest a little bit. Or, we could just go straight back to Houro Palace."

"Yeah..."

Taiki nodded and looked around. He spotted something and yanked on Youka's hand.

"Youka, look! That dog has wings!"

Not far from the tents, a huge dog had been tied up among the horses. At the moment, a few men and women were tending to this mount.

"That is a tenba. Would you like to go over and look at it?"

"Can I?"

"No problem." Youka held Taiki's hand and lead him closer to the tent that the dog had been tied to.

The dog's shape was enormous with a white body and a black head, not to mention a pair of wings folded against its back. It was beautiful.

"Isn't this...Mt. Hou Kou? I wish you the best of health." Among the men and women who were caring for the tenba, a tall and strong woman recognized Taiki and hurried to pay him her respects.

"Is this tenba your mount?"

"Yes."

"Would you let the Kou see him for a moment?"

"It would be my honor."

The woman smiled and encouraged Taiki to get closer to the tenba. Under Youka's protection, Taiki moved slowly towards it with apprehension and

realized that in reality, the tenba was much bigger than he had first thought it to be.

"He's so big..." Taiki mumbled.

"He's actually relatively smaller compared to most tenba," replied the woman who had kneeled down.

It looked as if out of all the people who were taking care of it, she was his master.

"Please get up. May I pet him?"

"Thank you, Mt. Hou Kou. Of course you may pet him. His behavior is quite docile."

After he heard her say this, he hesitated a moment and then cautiously reached his hand out. The fur of the tenba looked shiny, but it felt much harder than it looked. Taiki rubbed its neck, and the tenba closed its eyes with a comfortable look on its face.

"He's really tame... Does he have a name?"

"He is called Hien."

"Hien," repeated Taiki. With its eyes still closed, Hien nuzzled against Taiki's hand as he stroked it

under the ears.

"Does he bite?"

"Don't worry. He doesn't randomly bite people. Tenba are already a relatively docile kind of youju."

Moreover, Hien's personality is especially gentle. It's very clear to him that there are people whom he should not bite."

"How smart."

Taiki talked with the woman about tenba for a good stretch of time. He was very interested in how she caught the tenba, how she takes care of it, and what it feels like to ride upon its back.

The woman's answers were very easy to understand. In addition, her tone was kind, her words polite, and her voice was very clear. It all gave Taiki the sense that she was a strong person.

To be honest, Taiki could still not determine an adult's age by looking at them. He could only guess from her appearance that she was probably older than Youka and Teiei by a lot.

Though, this could possibly just be due to the impressions she held. It was very hard to compare the impressions of the nyosen to regular people, so he also felt like the woman's age was very far from a nyosen's.

Nyosen in general are all very pretty. They always wore beautiful clothes and ornate hairpins, each one more extraordinary than the next.

Opposite to that, this woman wore deep-colored men's clothing and had not even one accessory upon her body. Her dark brown hair had also not been arranged into a knot, but instead, it hung freely down to her shoulders. She was tall and her movements were graceful and gentle. She was pretty, but it was completely different than the beauty of Gyokuyou and the nyosen. It was very obvious that she was a different type of person.

"Thank you for letting me look at Hien." Taiki was reluctant to take his hand off of Hien's body.

"It was nothing. I believe Hien was also very happy."

"Where are you from?"

"I am from Jou Province. I am a General of the Jou Provincial Army, called Risai. My name is Ryushi."

A glimmer entered Taiki's eyes.

Every kingdom has nine provinces, each of which is ruled by a Shukou, a provincial governor. The military that the Kou controls is called the Army of the Provincial Kou, which is shortened to simply the Provincial Army. The size of this military varies in each province from two armies to four, depending on how big the province is. Thus, it follows that for each province, there are anywhere from two to four people holding the rank of general.

"So you are a general." No wonder she felt so different from the nyosen.

"Yes, to the best of my ability."

Since Taiki got along so exceptionally well with her, he couldn't bear to disappoint her, but no matter which way he looked at it, he had not received the revelation.

"...I wish you well until the equinox."

Risai's face revealed a sliver of a self-deprecating smirk, but it lasted only a very short moment. She immediately recovered her previous smile and bowed to Taiki.

"Thank you very much. I respectfully wish you a healthy body."

"Thank you."

Having to choose a suitable person was a painful task. It seemed as if the revelation would not base its occurrence on Taiki's likes and dislikes, which made Taiki feel even worse.

"Oh... If I have time, can I come back and see Hien?"

Risai smiled clearly and said, "Of course, anytime."

Taiki encountered a fight on his way back from taking a stroll around after he had left the tenba.

Not a small amount of people had gathered at a place in front of him, and Taiki was wondering what was going on when he heard the nyosen whispering. He heard the word "fight" and anxiously grabbed onto the lower part of Youka's dress.

Regardless of what kind of creature was involved, any sort of violence frightened Taiki for the same reason that he was scared of blood. But it wasn't that he was fearful of getting hit. It was the actual act of hitting that he was afraid of, and at the same time, he was terrified of the people who did such things.

"Why is there a commotion?"

It wasn't until they heard the nyosen's voice that the people noticed that Taiki had arrived, whereupon they bowed down.

"Uh... That is..."

The masters of Mt. Hou inherently hate blood and violence, so incidents that cause bloodshed are strictly prohibited here. However, when they do occur, those who caused the trouble are immediately expelled from Mt. Hou.

"Really! How can you people from Tai Kingdom be so careless and hot-blooded!" A nyosen couldn't hold it in any longer and yelled at them as she approached the crowd.

Because every kingdom had different local customs and practices, they all also had their own national character. The people of Tai Kingdom were famous for their drive to outdo others. Originally, every kingdom's characteristics would also flow into their kirin, but exceptions do occur.

"Stop! Where do you think you are?"

When the crowd of spectators heard the nyosen, they opened up a path.

In the middle of the gathering stood two men. One of them was a big fellow, built like a rock and holding a long sword. By comparison, the other man whose hands were held in fists, looked short, though one could see that he still had a capable figure. The latter of the two men was wearing a sword, but he had not drawn it. Also, any discerning person could tell that this spirited man, though shorter, was superior to the other.

It was this bold man who had attracted Taiki's attention.

His black armor contrasted sharply with his white hair, and the sun had made his complexion dark.

He was tall, and his physique and movements were frighteningly agile, giving off the impression that he was a fierce beast.

The nyosen passed through layer after layer of people, intending to put a stop to this fight, not expecting that the fight had already resolved itself. After

dodging an attack from the sword, the bare-handed man had knocked the big fellow over with his fist.

The big fellow hit the ground and was not able to get back up. The man looked at him and said, "How dare you draw your sword in the honorable residence of the Mt. Hou Kou! You should be extending our gratitude to the Kou."

The man's movements did not contain even a bit of the arrogance of a winner, and his speech held a modest tone.

After he said these things coldly, he turned and met Taiki's line of sight.

--The man's eyes were crimson, like the color of blood.

Taiki couldn't help but grab Youka's dress tightly. Taiki feared this man from the deepest part of his heart.

As Taiki, who was ready to leave, tugged at Youka, the man slowly made his way over and kneeled to him.

"I didn't think the Mt. Hou Kou would be here as well."

The man's expression softened greatly, very much warming Taiki's first impression of him. People came to greet Taiki, so he had no choice but to stand there, tightening his grip on Youka's dress.

"I'm extremely sorry to have done such disrespectful things here. I must ask the Kou of Mt. Hou to please forgive me."

Taiki wasn't able to reply, so Youka spoke to the man for him.

"Please refrain from cause any more trouble on Mt. Hou."

"I really am very sorry!"

Youka had been holding Taiki's hand and moved it in order to soothe Taiki. She then pat his back lightly and pushed him forward slowly.

"It's okay now. There's no more fighting. Luckily, no one was seriously hurt."

It seemed as though Youka was telling this to Taiki, so he could only nod. Taiki was truly unable to say anything because the man in front of him really scared him.

The man kneeling on the ground looked like he was older than Risai. His hair had been tied up in the back very simply, and its silver color seemed to radiate a slight blue sheen. Perhaps it was because of this that he looked older. He had handsome features, and the corners of his eyes revealed a shrewdness. The line of sight that he had directed over to Taiki was as sharp as an arrow.

The man smiled and said, "It looks like I've really frightened you. I'm extremely sorry."

"Don't be..." Taiki finally spoke. "I was just a little shaken... Where are you from?"

"I am from Kouki. I am General Saku of the Tai Kingdom Kingun."

When they heard his name, the people nearby began talking to each other, causing a small commotion. It looked like this man was well-known.

The Kingun consists of three armies that belong exclusively to the ruler. Together with the three armies of the Kou of the capital province, who is appointed by only the kirin, it is called the Rokushi, the Six Armies. Because of the nature of kirin, they aren't able to command the army, so in reality, the ruler directs the army in the place of the kirin. Thus, the Rokushi is also called the Oushi, the Royal Army.

"My name is Sou, and I am called Gyousou."

Taiki was frightened by his direct gaze, but he had to say a few words. Being pulled in two directions by these conflicting conditions, he could only toughen up and speak.

"So... You're a general."

Even though they were both generals, he felt like Gyousou was much more stern than the gentle impression he had gotten from Risai.

The difference between Gyousou and Risai was either because of their personalities, or the fact that their positions were not the same since one was a Kingun General and the other was a General in a provincial army. Taiki really had no clue why.

"Yes. I am humbly most satisfied with my skill with the sword."

Though he said this, Taiki could feel that this person believed in all of his abilities. His body was filled with ambition.

Taiki could not stay here any longer.

At this point, he felt that the other person must be wondering if he could be the king. After Taiki was sure nothing unusual had occurred, he pulled on Youka's sleeve lightly.

"...I wish you well until the equinox."

It wasn't easy for Taiki to say this, but it wasn't until he finished that he was able to look away.

Gyousou nodded in respect. As to what expression he had on his face, Taiki had no idea.

The group of people surrounding them made another commotion.

"So it wasn't Saku?"

It was not known who said this, but it sounded like he had a renewed hope in becoming the ruler.

"Gyousou? Oh, the Oushi's General Saku."

The next day, Taiki asked the Risai, the female general that he had just met, if she knew Gyousou.

She didn't look discouraged at all and gave an enthusiastic welcome to Taiki, who had come to pay Hien a visit. When the nyosen were chatting with Risai's servants, Taiki sat next to Risai and Hien.

"Madam Risai, you're also a general, right? Do you know him?"

Risai shook her head. "I am a general, but I'm a general in a provincial army. Sir Gyousou is a general in the army under the direct control of the ruler. Our social positions are not the same."

It could be said that the difference between a general in a provincial army and a general in the Kingun is very great. A Kingun general may enter the royal palace and speak directly with the ruler. They can also participate in the morning court

council and assume a role in government. A general in the Army of the Provincial Kou is simply a person in the military. Thus, if one were to become a Kingun general, there is no doubt that they would be an important subject to the ruler.

"You say that, so is he very famous?"

"Yes. He is considered a very well-known swordsman and receives the genuine respect of his soldiers. I've heard others say that he is direct and tough, but that he is also intelligent and well-mannered."

After Risai finished saying this, she looked at Taiki. "Do you have an interest in Sir Gyousou?"

"...Yesterday, I came across a fight..."

Risai nodded. "So I heard. Someone was irritated and purposefully provoked Sir Gyousou. The fault is with the other person, not with Sir Gyousou. Supposedly, that person seriously insulted Sir Gyousou's character. Otherwise, this quarrel would never have occurred."

"So that's how it was..."

Risai looked directly at Taiki and asked, "Is Sir Gyousou the king?"

Taiki quickly shook his head. "No. It's just that he makes me feel scared..."

Since this wasn't what she expected to hear, a look of disappointment appeared on Risai's face. "Oh... So it wasn't Sir Gyousou..."

"I heard people say that yesterday too."

Risai smiled. "He isn't a warm person, but he also isn't terrifying. I think he's a very strong man.

There are 12500 soldiers in an army, and to get every one of them to respect him is not an easy task. He has made enemies along the way, but there are far more that admire him. For Sir Gyousou to not be the king, it's a little disheartening."

"Do you also admire Sir Gyousou?"

Risai ran her hands thru Hien's fur. "Yes! Though I've never had the opportunity to actually meet him, I definitely respect him a lot, since I have also

lead troops before. Thus, if Sir Gyousou were to become king, I would certainly recognize his authority."

"I had no idea he was such a capable person."

Risai nodded. "If we're talking about swordsmanship, King En ranks first, and second is Sir Gyousou."

"Oh..."

"I think you might be able to find another person comparable to Sir Gyousou, but a person who possesses such a deep public support, and has both a talent for military and administrative leadership and also a high nobility and prestige, is few and far between."

Taiki nodded.

(...But, he didn't prompt any revelation...)

"It is regrettable." This came from the bottom of Risai's heart.

Anyone who had something to do with the military knew that talented people like General Saku of the Kingun were hard to come by. It was an exceptional case that Gyousou was still young when he became a general in the Kingun. It has been said that early on, the people of a rebellion that Gyousou quelled came to respect him greatly in the end.

It's not hard to find a military officer in other kingdoms who is strong or one that is honorable, but to find a person who is both of these things and also whose fame resounds through all the kingdoms, that is extremely rare to come by.

In truth, when she was hurrying along the Reikon Gate road, Risai had heard that Gyousou was among the crowds climbing the mountains, at which point she knew that she was not to ascend to the throne.

Because she was a compassionate general, the people thought of her as a very kind and honorable military officer. She received the attention of the people and their utmost expectations. They believed that she had what it took to be chosen, so she climbed the mountain. However, Risai herself had never thought herself

to be the best candidate. She believed that if she really compared herself to others in the world, she would not be able to surpass Gyousou.

"It really is...very regrettable..." mumbled Risai to herself.

Taiki felt bad when he heard this, so he said, "I think Madam Risai would make a great queen..."

When Risai heard this, she laughed. "You compliment me with these words. I thank you."

"I really think so."

"I am honored, but perhaps you believe in people too easily! There are those who will flatter the Kou for the sake of honor and wealth," said Risai, half in jest as she looked at Taiki. Taiki was surprised.

"No way!"

"Yes, these kinds of people are everywhere! There are many among the mountain-climbers who aren't capable of ascending to the throne, so they rely on this opportunity to befriend the Kou or the ruler in order to pave the way for their own future."

"Are there really?"

"It's unfortunate, but there are. For instance, a person like me might hope that after you've descended the mountain and gone to Tai Kingdom, you will promote me into the Oushi."

Taiki held his head askew. "I think...you're not that kind of person."

Risai laughed even more happily. "Kou, you really know how to speak. I am overjoyed by your words."

"Really?"

"Really," laughed Risai as she stood up and lightly brushed off the straw that was on her clothes. "It looks like the nyosen who accompanied you here have also finished their conversation. If you don't mind, please allow me to stroll with you around this area."

# Chapter 8

"Youka, can I go outside?" asked a restless Taiki, who had only entered Hoto Palace not too long ago.

Youka smiled. "Of course. Did you want to go see Madam Risai?"

"...Is that not good?"

"Of course not. Madam Risai is a good person. She is a general and we believe her to be a trustworthy person."

Obtaining permission, Taiki exited the palace surrounded by the nyosen who had been on the platform.

As the days went by, the nyosen had gotten to know quite a few of the mountain-climbers. First one nyosen, then another would encounter someone that they knew and stop to chat with them. Slowly the number of nyosen walking with Taiki would become smaller and smaller. Even Youka stopped just shortly before they reached Risai's tent to talk with an attendant from some other place. Taiki ran the remainder of the distance.

Currently the number of people who stopped to greet him had lessened, but there were still a lot of people who took the opportunity to befriend and chat with Taiki. Taiki had learned a way to avoid being bothered by idle people: he just had to run as quickly as he could.

"Madam Risai!"

Even before Taiki said anything, Risai had already come out of her tent.

"You've come."

"You knew I was coming?"

"When you're coming, Hien calls out happily."

"Really?"

"Yes, perhaps Hien thinks you're really his master!"

"That can't be."

"We'll never be sure. Youju are not able to speak, otherwise you could ask him." Risai laughed as she lightly patted Hien's neck. "Am I right, Hien?"

The tenba suddenly turned its head and rubbed it against Taiki's chest. Risai smiled wryly and said, "Look, didn't I just say so?"

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After they washed Hien and brushed his fur, Taiki and Risai used the remainder of the morning to stroll around. Risai very patiently answered all of Taiki's questions in detail. In addition, if there were any strange things that Taiki was unfamiliar with, she would explain all of them to him without exception.

Risai would also introduce Taiki to her friends. It seemed as though these people had gotten to know Risai after they had climbed the mountain, and they all felt like good people. Walking around with Risai always made Taiki feel an unrestrained happiness.

"Are all the people who come here from Tai Kingdom? Are there no people from other kingdoms?"

asked Taiki casually as he and Risai were walking slowly through a vast area surrounded by spring water that gushed from the bottom of a crag.

Risai couldn't help but lightly chuckle. "Of course. The ruler of Tai Kingdom is decided from the people of Tai Kingdom."

"Is that so?"

"Could it be that you didn't know?" Risai had a slight surprised look on her face.

"I wasn't brought back to live on Mt. Hou until recently, so there are a lot of things I don't know."

Risai nodded in understanding. "I wasn't aware. How rude of me. It is a rule that says the ruler of a kingdom must be from that kingdom."

"So all these people here, they're all from Tai Kingdom?"

"Well it's not limited to just that. It just requires that one is born in Tai

Kingdom."

"Oh..."

Risai held Taiki's hand as they walked for a bit when he suddenly stopped.

"Madam Risai, look at the really beautiful beast over there."

Risai turned to look where Taiki was looking and nodded.

"Yes, that's a sugu. They are very beautiful."

This creature looked a lot like a tiger. It had a long tail and an incredible multi-colored radiance.

Compared to the gentle impression the tenba gave people, the strength it displayed was much fiercer by far.

"The sugu makes the best kiju. It can cross a kingdom in one day."

"How powerful!"

The nyosen had said before that it took an entire month's time for a horse to completely cross a kingdom, which gave him an idea of how considerably big the land was.

"Yes, sugu are extremely obedient to their masters and are also very smart. You will not be able to find a beast braver on the battlefields than this one." Risai looked admiringly at the sugu and walked slowly towards it. "I would very much like to have a sugu."

"You want a sugu? Then what about Hien?"

"Of course I would like one. Hien is cute and docile, but his personality is too gentle to bring onto a battlefield. I am a military commander, so I must consider matters of war first and foremost."

"I see..."

"I'm hoping that I'll encounter a sugu on my way back from Mt. Hou."

"If you run into one, will you catch it and take it back with you?"

Risai laughed. "That's my plan. Before I came, of course I very much

anticipated meeting you, but I also looked forward to a chance to capture and take back a sugu."

"Oh..."

"If I dared to spend money, I could probably buy a sugu to take home, but it would be very embarrassing to buy a youju. No, I should actually say that for something like a kiju, I would like to rely on my own strength to tame it."

"I see."

Risai smiled as she nodded, and then called out to the tent next to which the sugu was tied up, "Forgive me for inquiring, but is the master of this sugu available?"

"If you're asking about Keito, he is my mount."

They suddenly heard a voice from behind them. Risai looked surprised as her reflexes put her into a defensive stance.

"Sir Gyousou..."

It was that man. Today, he wasn't wearing that armor from before, but his sword was still at his waist.

It had been hard to forget his ice-like hair and his eyes that were like rubies.

After Risai looked at Taiki and Gyousou, she stood up straight. "This is the first time we have met. I am--"

"You are Madam Risai of the Jou Provincial Army, are you not?" smiled Gyousou. Risai looked pleased.

"Why do you...?"

"General, your name is known far and wide. There are few that do not know of you."

"Just as I thought!" Taiki blurted out. Risai and Gyousou both turned to look at him. "Ah... Excuse me."

Gyousou was very interested in Taiki's response. "As you thought?"

"It's like this... I had previously said to Madam Risai that she was a very exceptional general. It seems as if I'm not the only one who thinks so..."

Risai's face reddened a little bit as she turned to Gyousou. "The Kou speaks too highly of me."

"Not at all," said Gyousou with a smile.

"Kou, you have very good insight. It's just as you said. The people exalted when Madam Risai was promoted into the Jou Provincial Army."

"Please don't listen to him, Kou."

Risai became shy, which was unusual for her, so it made her feel awkward.

Gyousou noticed her slight distress and could not hold in a smile. Taiki stood on the side and, seeing Gyousou's smile, realized that he wasn't the scary person that he had originally thought him to be.

"That's right. I don't know if it was Madam Risai or the Kou that had a question about Keito."

Gyousou looked at Taiki and Risai.

"The Kou said that he would like to get a good look at him."

"If it is the Kou, then I do not think Keito will have any objections." Gyousou showed them to the sugu.

Observing it from so closely, Taiki discovered that its eyes left a deeper impression than its appearance. He was stunned by the complicated and beautiful colors in it.

"Might I ask...if Sir Gyousou captured this sugu with his own hands?"

"Yes, because I don't like to buy kiju."

"Why is that? Isn't capturing youju really dangerous?"

Suddenly, Gyousou raised the corners of his lips. Taiki flinched at seeing this intense sort of smile, and it scared him.

"These youju originally come from the wild and become kiju when people rein in and restrain them. For us to become their masters, if we didn't risk our lives as payment to them, wouldn't that be unfair to them?"

"Oh...yeah..."

Gyousou stroked Keito fondly, as the frightening smile that was previously on his face disappeared.

"I captured him with my own hands, and trained him myself. This sugu and my sword are both my treasures."

Risai was very astonished and asked, "You trained Keito on your own?"

"Essentially. The trainer had not done a good job. He does not listen to anyone but me," said Gyousou as he smiled. He leaned his head and looked at Taiki. "Normally, people say that doing this is not smart, because a dangerous accident could happen in a second."

"Oh..."

"Oh, that's right." Risai looked at Gyousou. "Is Sir Gyousou's sword the one bestowed upon you by the previous King Tai?"

"Yes."

"It must be an exceptionally fine sword."

"It is most definitely a very sharp blade."

The sword is a weapon, not a simple accessory. When this thought entered Taiki's head, he couldn't help but quiver with fright.

Since Gyousou was a military man, fierce combat was unavoidable for him. He probably received this sword through some great military achievement, and carried it to do battle with.

"So what was the achievement?"

In response to Taiki's question, Gyousou shook his head.

"It wasn't because of some great feat. Once, the late king had asked King En to grant me a duel."

"Did you win?"

"I lost," laughed Gyousou happily. "We fought three times, and I only won once. The late king was very pleased with my one victory, so he bestowed this sword upon me. I do not use this sword to fight with, so it really is a treasure."

"King En is truly very powerful."

"He was too much for me, but I tried my best." At this, that frightening expression reappeared on Gyousou's face. "Had I also lived five-hundred years, I believe that King En would not be a match for me."

This was Gyousou's utmost confidence in himself.

If he hadn't said it with such a serious tone, it might not have scared Taiki. It was just this expression that appeared every now and then that really frightened him.

"I would also very much like to have a sugu..."

Risai looked at Keito. Gyousou quickly replied, "I know a good place to look for them. Why don't I take you there?"

"Really?"

"I have almost completed everything here that I came to do. I was thinking that perhaps I could find another sugu before the next Ankou Day."

"You already have Keito. You wanted another one?"

"If I could get another sugu, then Keito could rest more. Three might be too many, but I think two is a perfect number."

"I understand your meaning. It's just that...are you really willing to let others know where to find them?"

"Why not? If a person wants one, they should catch one for themselves."

"Aren't you afraid that other people will exhaust the place of sugu?"

Gyousou laughed lightly. "What is there to be afraid of? Those who want to become master to a sugu are required to have many skills."

-----

After they left Gyousou, Taiki let out a big sigh, but he knew that he was still very anxious.

"What's the matter?"

"Nothing..."

Risai could see Taiki's mood in his face.

"Kou, are you still afraid of Sir Gyousou?"

"Madam Risai, it seems like you don't feel it at all."

"I think that he is able to strike fear into the hearts of all the enemies who face him... What I mean is, he truly makes other people feel a little nervous."

"So that's it..."

"He has a frightful ambition. You see a friendly dog and relax, but then you realize that it's really a wolf, and so you're paralyzed with fear. Do you know that feeling?"

This had perfectly described his emotions.

"I know exactly what you're saying."

Risai murmured, "It is just as the rumors said. He has an extraordinary ambition... It's too bad he's not the king."

"Really?" Taiki was truly afraid of Gyousou.

Risai nodded. "A ruler isn't simply a good person. A ruler who is too compassionate will lead his kingdom astray, and one who is too modest will bring his kingdom to ruin... I sincerely believed that Sir Gyousou was the one."

"Madam Risai, do you really mean that?"

Risai looked at Taiki, whose head was raised toward her, and smiled. "After meeting Sir Gyousou, I am a little embarrassed that I came to climb the mountain. --Sir Gyousou is really the strongest of the strong."

"It doesn't look like there's a ruler among those who have climbed the mountain."

When Youka said this, a month and a half had already passed since the summer solstice.

It was late at night with the moon high in the sky, and the insects chirped

continuously.

"Then...it should be okay if we don't go to Hoto Palace tomorrow, right?"

Youka nodded as she tidied up the bed.

Sanshi silently helped Taiki change clothes.

"I suppose we could just close the gates of the outer palace. That way, we can let everyone know that they should stop hoping."

"And then what?"

"And then we let things happen. If you want to go outside and play, you might as well."

"Really?"

"Yes, since there'll be people to help us watch out for you. You're probably going to look for Sir Gyousou and Madam Risai, right? As long as those two are there, then we don't need to worry. Also, Sanshi will be by your side."

After that day when he talked to Gyousou, Taiki always stopped by to visit him.

Ordinarily, he would first pay a visit to Risai, and then after he played with Hien, he would visit Gyousou. Eventually, it became an unexpected sort of routine.

Occasionally, Gyousou still made Taiki's heart jump, but after a while, he got used to that too. There were normally very few men on Mt. Hou, so after Taiki became familiar with Gyousou, if he didn't visit him, he would feel as if something was missing.

"Then..." Taiki looked up at Youka. "Tomorrow Madam Risai and Sir Gyousou are going out to the Yellow Sea to look for sugu."

Youka raised her eyebrows. "And?"

"...And I would like to go with them... I can't go, can I?"

When Risai invited Taiki, he had told her that the nyosen might not allow him to go.

Youka exchanged glances with Teiei, who was standing in the corner of the room, and then sighed and said, "All right, since you don't usually ask us for anything. Just please do your best to be careful. Don't get hurt or we'll be very worried."

A wide grin spread across Taiki's face. "Okay!"

-----

The darkness was still draped over the sky though daybreak was approaching. Taiki rushed over from Hoto Palace to Risai's tent without stopping.

The surroundings were so hazy that human shapes were hard to make out, but the camp area had been illuminated by torches.

"Madam Risai!"

"Kou."

Taiki saw that Gyousou had already put on his armor and was standing with Keito, waiting for him to arrive. Risai was just placing a saddle onto Hien's back, and it was the first time that Taiki had seen her in armor. She turned her head and looked at the nyosen following Taiki and nodded.

"Are we ready to set off?"

Risai smiled. "Almost."

"Am I riding with you on Hien?"

"That's right."

Teiei, who had chased behind Taiki, bowed deeply. "There are none who can replace Taiki's person, so Madam Risai and Sir Gyousou, I please ask that you must take care of him, no matter what."

Risai and Gyousou returned the bow.

"We earnestly believe in both of your abilities, so the danger shouldn't be too great that Taiki is with you. However, please be sure that you return him before noon."

"Certainly."

Teiei nodded, and then noticed that only a tenba and a sugu were ready with

saddles.

"Are you not bringing any attendants with you?"

"If we bring attendants on horses, I'm afraid that we would not be able to make it back by noon," said Risai difficultly. Teiei creased her brow.

The Yellow Sea is quite a dangerous place, and though it protects the Five Mountains, countless numbers of youma reside there. Youju will obediently listen to their masters as soon as they are subdued, but they are originally born wild, so they are dangerous and will attack people.

Besides youma and youju, there are countless other hazards hidden in the Yellow Sea, such as quicksand, swamps full of poisonous vapors, boulders falling off the mountain, and the like.

"Can the both of you guarantee that you will bring the Kou back without the slightest injury?"

Risai nodded her head solidly. "We will definitely make sure he does not get injured in the least."

"It's too bad we can't come with you. The nyosen need the permission of Genkun to leave the Five Mountains. I know it's very dangerous there, so please consider the Kou's safety first while you're hunting.

He must not come into contact with blood. This I ask of you."

"Yes... Of course." A labored expression floated onto Risai's face. Teiei ignored it and continued speaking.

"If you really must kill a youma, one of you please take the Kou away first...even if it means abandoning the other person."

"Teiei..." Afraid that Teiei would keep talking, Taiki gently tugged at the bottom of Teiei's dress.

"We are not setting off on a sightseeing excursion," said Gyousou with a stern look upon his face.

"The main purpose of this trip to the edge of the Yellow Sea is to hunt for

youju. Thus, I cannot guarantee you that it won't be dangerous. However, we are most confident that we can protect the Kou, so that is why we have invited him to come with us. For you to give us these instructed again and again, I must say that the nyosen of Mt. Hou are being a bit too discourteous."

Teiei looked unwaveringly at Gyousou. "...You are really full of self-confidence... I suppose that it would be useless to say anymore..."

Gyousou fearless looked back at Teiei, the unyielding glimmer in his eyes becoming more intense. "I must please ask the nyosen not to worry. The Kou is the Kirin of our Tai Kingdom. Protecting the safety of the Kou is the absolute responsibility of the people of Tai Kingdom. Can the nyosen accept what I have said?"

The two looked at each other for a moment, until Teiei looked away briefly.

"What you've said does make sense... Then that is all I ask of you."

"Of course."

When Teiei turned to make her way back to the palace, Gyousou grasped his sugu's reins and said, "The daylight is almost here. We should head out, Madam Risai."

Though the tenba was galloping very quickly, riding upon it didn't feel shaky.

Whether it was leaping across the crags, running upon flat land, or passing through the dense forests, it completely didn't affect those who rode upon it. This steady feeling was not at all like riding on the back of an animal. Sitting on top, Taiki felt both surprised and blissful.

It seemed as if the tenba had exceptional eyesight in the dark. Even if it was going through areas where rocks and trees were blocking the moonlight, it didn't slow down at all.

"...What does it feel like?" asked Risai, who was holding Taiki with her arms as she clutched the reins with her hands. Taiki turned back to look at her.

"It's a lot like a kirin."

Risai showed a little surprise. "You've ridden a kirin before?"

"Yes... Is that strange?"

Risai smiled wryly. "Now that is quite a rare experience. --Also, how could Hien compare to a kirin? I feel rather embarrassed."

"Really?"

"Yes. Of course, since you are a kirin, you may not think that riding a kirin is anything special. But for someone like me, I wouldn't dare to dream of riding one."

"Oh..."

Taiki had never thought about that before. Certainly, when he recalled riding upon Keiki, he felt a little bit bewildered, but not that it was anything terribly special.

"But really, I would never have dreamed that I would actually have the opportunity to ride upon the same saddle with you."

After Taiki looked up and saw Risai smiling, he tilted his head, which meant that he didn't object to what she had said.

Taiki had wanted to ask Gyousou for his opinion, but when he turned to look at Gyousou, who was riding Keito next to them, he only saw Gyousou's profile as he looked ahead with a stern expression on his face. Taiki supposed that Gyousou hadn't heard the conversation between himself and Risai.

That frightening feeling emanated from Gyousou once again, and he looked like he was still irritated with what Teiei had said before.

Taiki had originally been cheerfully riding on the tenba, but that feeling rapidly disappeared.

He felt as if it had all been his fault.

-----

Hien and Keito entered into a deep part of the Yellow Sea, gracefully passing through the rocky crags, and arrived at a place south of the Five Mountains--the base of Mt. Kou.

Gyousou, who had been riding in front, stopped Keito upon a hill that was

connected to a savage-looking rock which was protruding upward, and came down off the saddle. At this time, the moon could still be seen in the sky.

"Sir Gyousou, is this the place?" asked Risai, after she had stopped Hien. Gyousou nodded gravely.

Risai lifted Taiki down off the saddle. He looked at the ambitious Gyousou from the side.

"Uh... Sir Gyousou..."

"Yes?" Gyousou's tone was impatient. He unloaded the packs that had been tied to the saddle, not bothering to look back at Taiki.

With Gyousou's back towards him, Taiki lowered his head. "Just then...the nyosen were a little disrespectful."

Gyousou stopped what he was doing and sighed. His air of determination subsided as well.

"...You do not need to apologize to me."

"No... Actually...I am very sorry, Sir Gyousou, and Madam Risai too."

Risai had found a suitable place in a corner surrounded by crags to prepare a fire. When she heard Taiki say this, she couldn't help but laugh a little.

"You need not think about it. I know that it's very normal for the nyosen to worry."

"No!" Taiki looked at the two of them.

"I...am an ailing kirin."

The two looked at Taiki, making him feel embarrassed, so his face turned red.

"That's just a metaphor..." Taiki tried his best to find a suitable way to describe it. "Teiei wasn't doubting the abilities of Madam Risai and Sir Gyousou. It's because I can't quite take care of myself, so that's why she was so anxious."

Risai smiled warmly. "Kou, in this world, you are someone whom no one can replace. You shouldn't sell yourself short."

Taiki shook his head. "No! The nyosen worry so much because I can't do any of the things a kirin is supposed to be able to do! That's what I think it probably is... I...don't even have any shirei."

Gyousou and Risai both opened their eyes widely, and then exchanged glances with each other.

Since kirin cannot stand blood, they have no way of holding a weapon and fighting with others, even if their opponent is a youma or a youju.

Thus, the ones that are able to help protect the kirin are his shirei. It is common knowledge that a kirin possesses a countless number of shirei. If a kirin does not have any shirei, that means that he has no way of protecting himself.

"And it's not just that. I cannot transform either."

After hearing this, Gyousou and Risai were even more shocked.

"I should have a lot of shirei and depend on those shirei to protect myself, but I don't have even one.

If we have to run away, I should be able to run away by changing into kirin form, but I don't know how to transform."

Telling other people about how useless he was made him feel ashamed. Taiki couldn't help but shrink down his body a little bit.

"That's why the nyosen are so extremely worried about me. They've thought up all sorts of methods to try to cure me, and even specifically asked the Taiho of Kei Kingdom to come help me.."

When he thought about how worthless he was, and how that made everyone around him worry about him and concentrate their care upon him, Taiki had no choice but to feel sad.

Gyousou gently patted Taiki's head with his big hand.

Taiki looked up and saw only a warm expression gazing in his direction. Though it was still the Gyousou who sometimes frightened people, he occasionally had a kinder side to him.

"We were not planning on using any shirei, so please don't worry."

"At least...I still have a nyokai."

Gyousou smiled. "That is reassuring."

Gyousou's hand, which was bigger by far than Keiki's hand, stroked Taiki's head.

"Yes..."

"What kind of bait are we going to use?" asked Taiki to Risai as she was setting a trap.

"A gem. Sugu are especially fond of agate."

Risai took out a piece of agate about the same size as a chicken's egg for Taiki to look at.

"Wow... It's so big... The sugu will really eat it?"

Risai smiled. "It's just like a cat and the silervine."

"I see..."

Risai put the piece of agate in Taiki's hand, turned to Gyousou and said, "I'm going to lay out some bait to lure them over here."

Risai jumped onto her tenba.

"Lure?"

"The shattered pieces of agate. Sir Gyousou, I leave the Kou in your care."

"I understand."

After taking a giant leap, Hien flew outward. At this time, the eastern sky had slowly grown whiter.

The middle of the night was the most suitable for hunting, because very few youju wandered around in when the sun was high in the sky. Currently, there was still a stretch of time before it was light out. This wasn't the best opportunity to hunt, but taking into consideration Taiki's safety, Gyousou and Risai chose this period of time.

After Gyousou tied a rope onto a stake that had been driven into the ground,

he lightly patted his hands, stood up, and walked towards Keito who was laying on the rocks by the fire.

"Kou, would you like to rest?"

"Yes."

Gyousou leaned on Keito and motioned for Taiki to come beside him, whereupon Taiki obediently walked over and sat next to him.

"Do you think we'll be able to catch one?"

"We'll have to see how lucky we are."

"Did you catch Keito here?"

Gyousou nodded. "In all the Ankou Days that I passed through, I think it was my sixth attempt that I caught him."

"It must be pretty hard then?"

"To be honest, it's a lot of trouble just to set all those traps."

Since he didn't know how the complex apparatus formed by the chains and ropes would be operated, Taiki sunk into his fertile imagination almost immediately.

"Are you scared of me?"

Faced with such a sudden question, Taiki lifted his head and looked surprisingly at Gyousou.

"No..."

"Sometimes I feel that when you look at me, it seems as if you want to get far away from me. Or is it perhaps you smell something horrible on me, and you're afraid that it's contagious?"

"It's not like that!"

"Or are kirin afraid to look at me?" Gyousou revealed a sliver of a bitter smile. "Kirin are very compassionate creatures. It looks like I have been spared compassion, hasn't it?"

"Not at all..."

"I am a warrior. I cannot be compassionate. That is unavoidable... Kou, if you recognize anything in which I am lacking, I hope that you can tell me, because I would like to know in what area I have not done well."

Gyousou's tone was still and his voice was so light that it felt like it dissolved into the night. Taiki was at a loss.

"...I think perhaps Sir Gyousou has misunderstood."

Gyousou looked inquiringly at Taiki.

"Or perhaps, it is the color of your eyes... It reminds me of blood, and that frightens me a little..."

"I appreciate your concern for me, but it is not necessary to be too kind to me."

Taiki calmly gathered up the courage to look back at Gyousou and said, "...I really don't know how to explain it."

"You can say anything. Do not worry about me."

"I...I've always considered my personality to be weak. The nyosen often tell me that I lack ambition, that I should have more confidence in myself. I don't know why I'm like this."

Gyousou looked at Taiki with a deep silence.

"Sir Gyousou, you're not the same way. You're full of self-confidence. Truthfully, I'm not sure if I would describe it as ambitious, but I think the sense that you give people is that you are driven, especially...when that determination sometimes rises up very intensely. --Do you understand what I'm talking about?"

Gyousou nodded.

"So that's why I get a little scared. It's a little bit different than envy."

Taiki looked at the fire next to Keito.

"Fire...is warm and bright, but at the same time, it's strong and scary, right? So that's why I'm afraid... I think that's probably how I feel about you."

Even Taiki himself didn't understand why he felt this fear.

"But I'm not down on myself because of this. I don't think it's because of any sort of violence that I feel scared. It doesn't feel quite the same. And it isn't like the fear I feel when I see blood. That feels different too..."

No matter how he said it, he just couldn't find a way to express what it was that he was feeling. The more he thought about it, the more flustered Taiki would get, and suddenly, he felt like crying.

"It's not quite an unpleasant feeling. A big fire is frightening, but it's also beautiful and amazing.

That's what I've been trying to say. I feel like you're very great, but at the same time, I'm a little scared of you."

He put his hands to his face.

"There's no need to cry."

"I'm sorry..."

"It's my fault for asking such a strange question."

"Not at all..."

Gyousou laughed warmly and gently stroked Taiki's hair. "You are a good child."

"No... That's..."

"You are both honest and kind. I believe Tai Kingdom will definitely get better."

"Do you really think so?"

Gyousou nodded. He hugged Taiki's shoulders with the arm he was using to stroke Taiki's head as he looked into the fire.

Afterwards, neither of them said anything. Previously leaning on Keito, Taiki shifted toward Gyousou's body and sunk into the silence.

# Chapter 9

"Sir Gyousou!"

Taiki saw the ashes from a torch flying around and its light growing closer to where he was sitting. It was Risai returning on Hien's back. A sliver of a white light had just begun revealing itself in the sky to the east.

"Sir Gyousou, I've discovered a suspicious cavern."

"Oh?" Gyousou stood up.

"It's near a swamp not too far from here. I saw tracks coming out of it, but I didn't know if they were those of a sugu or not."

"Is it its lair?"

"Perhaps."

"We should go take a look."

Risai lifted Taiki onto Hien as she climbed on as well, and Gyousou mounted Keito.

-----

The cavern was an opening in the crags at the edge of a swamp where a mixture of murky water and mud had accumulated. The stretch of land between the swamp and the cave was overgrown with weeds in such a way that it was as if there was a path through it.

Hien and Keito tried to get closer to the cavern. By means of the light from the torches, they saw tracks leading into the cave.

Gyousou stopped Keito. Comparing the prints that Keito had just made, he discovered that the tracks looked like they were left by a creature bigger than a sugu.

"It may not be a sugu... But then, what is it?"

Risai got off of Hien and looked into the mouth of the cave.

An arrangement of giant rocks formed the cave opening, which was about as

tall as Risai. They called it a cavern, but it could also be described as a big crevice forming a tunnel underneath a mass of connected crags.

Not too far in, the tunnel turned, so the deepest part of the cave could not be seen.

"I'd gone into it a little bit before to survey it. It looks like it goes very deep. Should we go inside?"

"Perhaps we might run into a dragon."

"That reminds me. The Dragon Palace is at the bottom of the Yellow Sea."

Gyousou investigated the inside of the cave once again.

"Anyway, that's what they say..."

"This cavern looks a bit too small to be one that went all the way to the bottom of the Yellow Sea."

"...Well then, what should we do?" Risai was a little uncertain.

"Why don't we go in for a look?" said Gyousou with his back to the others, and then turned around to look at Taiki. "What do you think?"

"Ah... I don't know."

"Then let's go inside and look around."

Risai walked into the cavern. "I'll walk in front. Sir Gyousou, please watch over the Kou."

"All right."

Taiki had some reservations and looked up at Gyousou. "Um..."

"Scared?"

He was originally going to shake his head, but then Taiki decided to speak honestly. "A little..."

"What's wrong?" Risai had already walked to the turn.

"We're going in now. Kou, you must not leave my side."

"Yes..."

-----

It seemed as if the tunnel passed under the mountainous crags. The path extended slowly downward, twisting and turning, as if it had no end. Though there was no wind, their flame wavered, which meant that there was air circulation. Though this path turned so much that it was hard to travel, there were no branches to distract them.

"It's fairly long..." Gyousou's voice echoed throughout the inside of the cave. Risai, who was in the front, stopped walking.

"There's no more road in front of us."

Looking in Risai's direction, there seemed to be a small open area beyond her. Except, the ground of the open area was lower than the path of the subterranean tunnel they had walked through. The difference in the elevation of the two was almost Taiki's height.

Risai jumped down and looked around this space, uneven because it was piled with rocks.

"Strange... There's nothing here."

"That shouldn't be. There's a bad smell inside this cave."

Taiki crinkled his eyebrows. A stench permeated the air just as Gyousou said this.

The smell wasn't so bad that it disgusted people. It was just enough to be bothersome.

In this rocky area, Risai constantly stepped up and down to get through it. At the next moment, Taiki saw her squatting next to a sloped, prominently smooth rock. After her figure moved farther and farther away, Taiki began to feel a strong anxiety.

"Ah! There's another tunnel over here that goes further down."

"Where?" Gyousou picked Taiki up and jumped down into the open area. He

stood on a piece of rock and looked where Risai was pointing.

--It was a dark cave.

"It looks like...there's something inside." Taiki murmured to himself.

"Hm?" Both Gyousou and Risai looked over at Taiki. He felt a chill running up his body from the soles of his feet. His heartbeat quickened and he became very distressed.

"...Let's go back... Over there... It's not safe."

"What's wrong?"

Taiki grabbed Gyousou's hand and reached out with his other toward Risai.

"I don't like that place."

Risai and Gyousou exchanged looks. Risai smiled and placed her hand at the edge of the cave.

"I just want to make sure whether anything is inside the cave."

"No! No, don't go over there!" Taiki was about to go forward and stop Risai, but after he took only one step, something suddenly appeared on the rocks and blocked him from going any further.

"You can't go over there!"

"Sanshi!"

The abrupt appearance of the nin'you caused Gyousou to immediately clutch the hilt of his sword, preparing to draw it. But then, Taiki let go of his hand and hugged the nin'you in front of him, at which point he realized that this nin'you was the nyokai that Taiki had mentioned before.

Risai was also very surprised, widening her eyes at the emergence of the white nin'you. Her hand was still placed upon the side of the cave as she turned the upper portion of her body toward Taiki, and just then, something suddenly took a hold of her hand.

Risai didn't even have time to react. She only heard the child next to Gyousou cry out.

"...Risai!"

Unable to hide the look of shock on her face, Risai's body was pulled into the cave. They saw her struggling legs just as they turned to look, and before they knew it, she was gone.

"...Risai!!"

As if in response to Taiki's desperate cries, a scream came from deep inside the cave.

Gyousou rushed toward the cave into which Risai had been swallowed up.

The dark tunnel extended downward, as if it had no end.

"Sir Gyousou!"

"Sanshi, please take the Kou away from here and ride Keito back to Mt. Hou!"

Sanshi nodded. However, Taiki had already run to Gyousou's side.

"Taiki, you cannot go!" Sanshi leapt forward and held onto the child.

"But, Madam Risai, she..."

Gyousou's glare stopped Taiki who had been pointing at the cave. "Entrust the matter of saving Risai to me. You must leave here quickly!"

"I can't!"

Before Gyousou could even answer him, Taiki had already shaken off Sanshi's embrace and jumped toward the cave.

"Taiki!"

Taiki tumbled his way toward the cave while throwing off Sanshi's outreaching hands. Not caring about anything, he jumped into it.

--No matter what, I can't leave Gyousou to save Risai all by himself!

-----

The cave was quite deep. After she looked around, Sanshi hurried to block Taiki's way.

"...Taiki!"

"No! I'm not going!"

Sanshi couldn't help but hold back the hand that she was going to use to grab onto Taiki's arm. For some reason, she just wasn't able to go against Taiki's wishes.

--Why is this?

Suddenly, Sanshi forgot where she was and looked at her own hands, lost in thought.

Taiki was Sanshi's master, and right now, the most important thing was to make Taiki's safety her first consideration. She had to take Taiki away from this dangerous place as quickly as possible.

Unfortunately, she didn't know what kind of dangerous creature this was. Actually, she didn't have to pay attention to Taiki's refusal. She could be very forceful if it was to keep Taiki safe.

At this thought, she grabbed Taiki's hand, who unexpectedly shook her off easily. Not to mention, she could not help but pull her hand back.

--Why?

Taiki did not have the time to acknowledge Sanshi's feelings now.

The end of the tunnel was also a wide area, filled with stalactites. The torch that Gyousou had brought was the only source of light inside of the cave, a weak fire that made it very hard for them to estimate the depth of the cavern with any certainty.

Taiki saw the silhouette of Gyousou in front of him with his sword drawn. Laying not far from his feet was Risai.

What frightened him, what had almost swallowed up Risai's body, was a giant dark shadow!

The shadow appeared to take shape. One end of it changed into the shape of a sickle and swung stiffly towards Risai!

"Toutetsu!" Sanshi cried out.

--How could this be?

Sanshi looked unwaveringly at the youma. No, perhaps it should not be called a youma. Its power was far beyond that of any ordinary person, and very few had ever seen it before. It was essentially a monster of legend.

Sanshi was no match for it. Is there anything in this world that can face the toutetsu without drawing themselves back?

Risai raised her head. "Kou, run away!"

"I can't!"

Gyousou pointed at Taiki. "The Kingdom of Tai needs you! You must not die here!"

"I don't want to be the only one to leave. We should all go together!"

A scream rang out.

The toutetsu targeted Risai with a violent force, and then followed it by turning to Gyousou and attacking him.

Gyousou flew to the ground, the toutetsu's attack roaring above his head. It then raised its claw even higher.

--I have to think of a way to stop that frightening weapon!

(How can I do it?)

--The Sword Seal.

"Rin, Byou, Tou, Sha, Kai, Jin, Retsu, Zen, Kyou!"

(I hope I can stop it.)

The black shadow suddenly stopped moving.

(And then...what do I do?)

Koushi. --Except Taiki was shaking so much that he was not able to perform it.

One part of the shadow turned toward him. In the light of the torch, Taiki could see a pair of eyes close to the ground.

Taiki made eye contact with the toutetsu.

"Use this opportunity and go quickly..."

Taiki looked back at the pair of pupils without the least bit of fear, except he didn't know how much longer he could keep this up.

"Sanshi, save Madame Risai!"

"Taiki..."

"Get Madame Risai out of there quickly!"

--There it was again! Sanshi ground her teeth.

There was no way she could disobey Taiki's words. Sanshi hurried to the collapsed Risai. She lifted the body that was lying in a puddle of blood and returned to Taiki's side. She glanced briefly at Taiki and sprinted toward the entrance of the cave.

"Sir Gyousou, you should also take this chance to leave here!"

The fallen Gyousou was outside of Taiki's scope of vision, and Taiki did not have the time to consider if he had actually been hurt.

He could not lose to this pair of blood-like eyes.

"Please..."

A reply came back in a deep voice. "That is not possible."

At this time, Taiki no longer had the extra energy to ask Gyousou to go.

For the first time, he understood that a person's eyes gave them such great leverage. One was the pressure he could put on his opponent; another was the force he could send back.

The struggle between the two filled the inside of the cave. It was as if time had stopped and left everything motionless.

(Sweat...)

That pair of eyes still stared at Taiki. Taiki was entirely unaware of how much time had passed. He felt the sweat on his forehead drip down along the bridge of

his nose. All he could do was softly breathe in and breathe out.

(Forehead...)

He didn't know when it started, but the area between his eyebrows hurt. It felt like something hot and solid had been buried there. The sweat was actually falling from the spot on his face that hurt.

(My eyes...)

Taiki's sight had already become blurry. Taiki relied completely on feeling the pressure that the toutetsu put on him in order to determine the toutetsu's position and to hold its line of sight tightly. Except, he had almost lost the sense that allowed him to find the direction that the force came from.

(Time...)

Just how much time had passed?

In his subconscious, Taiki had been concerned about the passage of time since a short while ago.

(I don't know...how much longer...)

Why he cared so much about time, he didn't know himself.

Suddenly, he felt resistance. The strength of the resistance became greater and greater, and Taiki opened his eyes wide. It was as if he had suddenly understood something.

Just in that moment of comprehension, his forehead felt like it was beginning to crack. Even the air that he breathed in was like a burn that went from deep in the bridge of his nose to his throat.

The toutetsu's line of sight began to waver, and its endurance suddenly doubled. There was no easy way for Taiki to continue challenging the power of his opponent. It was as if the time that caused a person to be scared had arrived.

--The seiki turned into shiki.

"Sir Gyousou..." He didn't know if Gyousou was still there; if he was, where would he be?

"You'd better go quickly..." Taiki felt that he could not keep this up anymore.

Taiki heard a still voice come from behind him. "I am very sorry... I can no longer walk."

The little kirin widened his eyes. His breathing became erratic.

--This was the moment it had turned to shiki.

"I am wounded. I cannot move--I must ask you to save me."

In the instant it appeared that his determination was wilting, it was revived.

-----

The two strengths were evenly matched; the situation became more precarious than before. Then and there, they sunk into a deadlock.

(Sweat...)

It fell from his forehead.

(I don't know...if there are any other ways?)

Taiki felt that Gyousou was nearby. He had not moved, nor did he once take his eyes off of Taiki.

(I can only...subdue it.)

Gyousou could not move, but Taiki was even less able to move.

(Submit...)

Taiki began to mumble.

(Shirei, submit...)

Taiki sensed the dark shadow suddenly move. The pressure that came from the shadow waned very slowly. For the first time, he felt the slightest bit of ease.

(Shirei, submit!)

His opponent's strength became even weaker.

He could blink his eyes without much effort. His vision, originally blurred by sweat, had become clear. Taiki saw the dark shadow with a dangerous weapon raised up high and completely stationary.

His two eyes sent out an intense force, and the dark shadow began to change shape.

First, it trembled and withered, slowly changing into a giant spirit that flooded the cavern.

Taiki was not scared at all. He only felt like a heavy burden had been lifted off of him. His limbs were originally like they were made of hard metal, but they had finally recovered their faculties.

"Submit..."

The dark shadow shrank smaller and smaller, slowly changing into the shape of a big cow. The next second, it became a tiger. Then it changed into a great eagle. And then again it turned into a large snake.

Countless changes--it proved that the dark shadow itself possessed an extraordinary power. Its last transformation was to that of a small dog that sat in front of Taiki.

"...Shirei, submit..." Taiki pointed toward the ceiling of the cave and received the Will of the Heavens.

In that instant, the power that was emanating from his line of sight suddenly disappeared. He lost the power to resist, and something went straight through him. From the hand that had accepted the Will of the Heavens came a great force that shattered all the restraints in his body.

"Subdue the monster! A union between the light and the dark!"

From his palm came a sound like a flood that pounded at his mind.

GOU. Gou, gou, gou, gou, gou, gou... *[note: different written characters with the same pronunciation of "gou" are going through taiki's head.]*

Taiki was drawn into the sounds, and scenes were shown continuously in his mind: A person.

Playing. Leaving. With the wind. A flag, fluttering. A whip, hitting, striking, water. --They overflow.

"Quickly according to the laws!"

It was simply intuition.

"Submit! Gouran!!" The dog stood up.

Amidst the haze, Taiki thought that this dog looked like a shiba inu. Just as he thought this, at every step, the shadow became smaller and smaller, and the fur on its body turned brown.

It would be good for it to be a small dog, but it would be better if the ends of its paws were white.

Gouran followed Taiki's wishes and transformed into a little dog. When the dog sat near Taiki's feet, it looked just like the shiba inu of his native land.

"Gouran..." Taiki bent down and the dog lifted its head to look at him, lovingly wagging its tail. Taiki reached out with his hand, and the dog licked it. He could feel the dog's warm tongue at his fingertips.

Taiki hugged the dog and pulled him close. His legs suddenly lost their strength and Taiki sat down in place.

"I can't believe it..." It didn't feel like he had just done what he did.

Deep inside, Taiki felt that he really wasn't a human, nor was he a beast. He was part of some power- a power both great and frightening.

(I'm not human.)

At this moment, he firmly believed that he was a kirin.

(So I'm not actually human...)

He realized profoundly just what kind of creature a kirin was.

Kirin are part of the Heavens. Thus, he was able to understand the Will of the Heavens, and also specifically express this Will.

--He was once confused. He could not believe that inside of his body, besides himself, there was another him.

Now, he finally understood.

It wasn't until after this that he discovered he possessed far more than the limits he had previously set for his own "self." Also, he had a direct connection with the Heavens. Unexpectedly, this enormous power had been poured into that little body of his.

"I can't believe it..."

Suddenly, upon hearing a voice, Taiki was brought back to his senses. He remembered that he was not the only one there. He hurriedly turned his head back and saw Gyousou in a daze, sitting amongst the rocks.

"And I thought that you would be snatched away by the toutetsu..."

Taiki forced himself to stand up though his legs didn't have strength in them. His legs shook, making it hard for him to walk forward.

"Are you all right? Are you hurt?"

"No..." Taiki held Gouran in his arms and plopped down next to Gyousou. Although the torch had long since gone out, a sliver of light shone through a thin crack in the rocks, so that in what was originally a pitch black cavern, it was not so dark that one couldn't see their fingers in front of them.

He turned to his side to check the condition of Gyousou's injuries. After he looked up and down Gyousou's body closely and carefully, he discovered that Gyousou did not have any open wounds.

"Where do you hurt? Do you have any broken bones?" Taiki lifted his head to look at Gyousou only to see him shake his head.

"I...am not hurt anywhere." His blood-red eyes revealed a mysterious look. "I'm very sorry... I did not tell you the truth."

Taiki was struck dumb for a moment and then immediately comprehended Gyousou's reasons.

"Sir Gyousou..."

-----

When Taiki had strongly urged him to leave, Gyousou understood very clearly. Under no circumstances should he have moved.

Had he moved, Taiki would surely have eased up a bit, and had Taiki eased up, it would have been all over. He didn't want to give the kirin, who was using all of his energy to deal with the toutetsu, any reason to relax.

Thus, he had decided then that he could not move. He understood extremely well that he could not split the kirin's attention. So he quietly sat where he was, not allowing Taiki to sense his presence, and looked on attentively at Taiki from the sidelines.

He silently looked at the child in front of him and what method he used to restrain this youma that was worthy of its reputation. He also understood in this way the determination that Taiki had previously mentioned. Other than determination, a better word could not be found to describe the intensity that had filled the cave at that time. He believed that Taiki probably shared feelings similar to him as well.

Gyousou could hardly even believe the things he had seen. He began to hold in astonishment the child in front of him.

"Thank you for saving my life."

"No..." Taiki shook his head. If it were not for Gyousou supporting him from behind, he probably would have been very quickly swallowed by Gouran's ambition.

If Taiki had been dejected at that time, Gyousou would probably have lost even his life. However, in order to obtain the state of mind not to escape and to stay where he was, it required a courage and wisdom that surpassed those of other people.

"I should be the one thanking you... Sir Gyousou...you are amazing..."

"Please save that talk for yourself." Gyousou smiled. He combed Taiki's sweat-drenched hair with his hand. "Really incredible...that Tai Kingdom is protected by so great a kirin."

Taiki looked at the man in front of him, whose eyes were emanating a warmth.  
(It is absolutely true; I really am a kirin...)

The hands that were holding Taiki tightly were really very gentle, but deep inside his heart, he was unable to cheer up.

(I am certain... Gyousou is not the king...)

"Ah! Just what was going on?" Teiei bit her hard fingernails and Youka's face was pale as she stood at one side.

"Has Madam Risai woken up?"

The faces on Risai's attendants were all helpless.

At daybreak, the nin'you had brought back an unconscious Risai, whose wounds on her entire body were horrible to look at. After the nin'you had set Risai down, she didn't explain anything at all, immediately disappearing without a trace.

This kind of situation was hard to deal with even without the all the noise the nyosen were making.

Risai, who had originally been entrusted with a great responsibility, was now sinking into a coma. By dusk, she had still not awakened.

"It was because we believed in Madam Risai, so we agreed to Taiki accompanying her. Now, Risai has come back, but we have not seen heads or tails of Taiki. What has happened?"

No matter how much they grumbled, Risai still did not move and did not respond.

"If by chance something unfortunate did happen, neither Risai nor us nyosen could live on so shamefully in this world." Just as the nyosen were reproaching themselves, they suddenly heard a loud noise.

"What was that?" Teiei looked around. Amongst the nyosen one of them pointed to the distance.

"Teiei! Look, a sugu is coming!"

"...Sir Gyousou!"

Under the light of the sun, they could only see a white light on top of the sugu, which was flying slowly towards them. Following the sugu was a tenba. One of

Risai's attendants cried out. "Hien!"

They only saw Hien and a beast with a tail that was long like a whip flying past a nearby tent, and stopping soundlessly next to a group of people. The crowd saw Gyousou sitting on top of the sugu and the figure of a child laying in his arms, and all of them sent out sounds of welcome without exception.

"Gyousou!" Teiei parted the crowd as she ran to the sugu's side. "What has happened?"

Teiei shouted. Gyousou faced her wordlessly.

"Taiki..."

"He's asleep. He is perfectly all right, not a wound on him."

At hearing Gyousou say this, Teiei silently leaned forward. She saw the child in Gyousou's arms presently sleeping soundly, without any injuries on his body that were cause to worry, and there were certainly far from any signs of suffering in his appearance. With great difficulty, Teiei breathed a sigh of relief. "As long as he's all right..."

Gyousou carried Taiki down from his mount. "If it's convenient, I'll just take him like this into the palace to rest."

"Before that, I would like you to give me an explanation of what happened. We'll see if you can, depending on that."

Gyousou smiled and said, "The Kou is very tired. He probably fell asleep during the ride back on the sugu."

"You have been away until this late... I requested that you bring Taiki back before the afternoon. This could cause resentment!"

"I'm very sorry, but we should take him back to the palace first. I don't think that you could bear to wake him. Then shortly thereafter, I will give you an explanation." It seemed as though there were other implications in Gyousou's words. Teiei looked all around her and discovered that the people surrounding them all carried lively expressions. She had no choice but to nod.

"...All right. Then, please." Teiei urged the nyosen to depart and walked in the

front, leading the way to the big gate. She called Gyousou to enter Houro Palace.

"Now then, what happened exactly?" asked Teiei as she walking upon the winding paths.

"The taming took quite a while..."

Teiei opened her eyes wide, and from Youka to all the nyosen that followed behind, there rose a commotion after they heard these words.

"Tame? Are you referring to Taiki?"

"I know about the Kou not having his own shirei."

"Yes... That's right. But this matter..."

"You need not worry. I will not divulge this information. Moreover, this matter is not a disgrace for Tai, but one worthy of pride, because the Kou already has a shirei."

Teiei glanced at the smiling Gyousou and then looked at Taiki. "So..."

"He has very successfully subdued a shirei. He confronted his opposition all the way from daybreak until just a short while ago."

Teiei released a deep sigh, as if she had just put down a heavy burden. "So that's how it was... I blamed you for this, even before I understood the circumstances. I'm very sorry. Please forgive me."

"That's not necessary." Gyousou laughed and looked down at the child in his arms. He didn't know if it was because Taiki was so tired, but as he was sleeping, his color looked a bit unhealthy. However, this would not have too big an impact. He simply needed to get some rest, and he will have recovered after he woke up.

Since Taiki could already subdue youma, then transformation shouldn't be any problem for him. The Mt. Hou Kou was not injured and there wasn't anything to be worried about, so words of comfort were unnecessary here.

"I suppose it is a good thing..."

"He is a worthy black kirin... Unexpectedly, he has tamed a toutetsu."

Teiei immediately turned back to look at Gyousou. "What did you just say?"

"I said that he has subdued a toutetsu to become his shirei."

"How can that be...?"

From within the nyosen came sounds of surprise.

This was simply impossible. Because there was no way for toutetsu to become shirei, and they were even much less a youma that could be tamed by a kirin.

"I am also very surprised." Gyousou's line of sight fell upon the child in his arms. Taiki was sleeping very deeply; even his eyelashes didn't move.

"This time, it was by chance that he was able to open his eyes. At the very least, he is letting us know that he is not an ordinary kirin. Gradually, he will let us all see his abilities."

"Excuse me?"

"If you feel that what I say is disagreeable, then I ask that you forgive me. I have no secret intentions."

It is just that he possesses such a great power, but is unaware of it. It's a little worrisome."

Teiei wrinkled her brow again.

"To take advantage of this situation to help him cultivate self-confidence would not necessarily be a bad thing. He put his life on the line to protect me. Had I not been there for him to protect, he might not have put in as much energy as he did. This could be very dangerous for him."

"Yes..."

"He has such strength, but not the slightest ambition. Is there some other reason for his lack of confidence? But regardless, his development in the future will cause both happiness and sorrow."

"Thank you for caring so much about him."

"This is as it should be... Perhaps I am only a person of Tai Kingdom who should not be saying such things, but I really think that if it is possible, it may be best for the Kou to live on Mt. Hou for a while longer. That would do him good."

Teiei looked unwaveringly at Gyousou. He understood the situation very well.

It was a pity that a revelation did not accompany this sort of person.

Gyousou looked at the child in his arms. "He is a remarkable kirin... It really is regrettable."

# Chapter 10

"Madam Risai, are you feeling better?" Taiki poked his head into the tent and saw Risai sit up.

"...Kou."

Because it was long distance travel, there was a limit to the number of attendants one could bring.

Thus, they had to think about how many of their belongings they could take along with them, and their tents could not be prepared too comfortably. The equipment in the tents were very simple, and most of the things that are brought out would probably be daily living necessities. However, the weather on Mt. Hou was pretty good, so the tents were pitched with a thinner cloth material. Though this was the case, the interior did feel very spacious, and there were no worries about those from the outside seeing inside of the tent.

Originally lying down on a simple bed, Risai immediately got up and draped a coat over her shoulders. Taiki hurried to stop her.

"I think it would be better if you laid back down." Taiki gave some water to an attendant inside the tent. "Today, I helped the nyosen run errands. I brought you some water."

In order to avoid being impolite, Risai straightened up her appearance a bit and bowed her head, saying, "Thank you for your concern."

Under an attendant's arrangement, Taiki sat nearby Risai and looked at her face. "How are your wounds healing?"

"Many thanks to you for bringing the Sensui. The pain has already gone away."

"...Oh, good." Taiki sighed and cocked his head to the side. "I hope they don't leave scars."

Risai smiled. "Please don't worry. With the additional support of the Sensui, and taking into consideration that I am a sennin, even if my wounds were more serious, I would still be all right."

Taiki blinked his eyes. His face was full of bewilderment. "What do you mean? Madam Risai, you're a sennin?"

"Even though I'm in a provincial army, I only needed to be a general in order to enter the Immortal Register and become a sennin. If I didn't do this, then I could not have served the provincial Kou."

"Why?"

This time it was Risai's turn to look surprised. "Do you not know? The provincial Kou is not a human, but an immortal. At the castle of the provincial Kou, if you are not a sennin, you cannot enter or exit."

The provincial Kou has a very long life, and if those who serve at his side do not also have longevity, then they would not be of much use."

"Oh..."

Risai saw that Taiki's face was still full of confusion and was extremely amazed. She had heard that this kirin had been raised in Hourai until not too long ago. Could it be that there are no sennin in Hourai?

"Shinsen do not have a life span."

"Is that so?"

Risai sighed softly. "...Kou, you are also a shinsen. Didn't you know that?"

"I am?"

"Yes. The ruler inherently holds a position in the Divine Register. When he becomes the ruler, he will no longer age. Moreover, it is not very easy for him to die. At the very least, he will not die from disease."

"So that's how it is."

"Kirin are also in the Divine Register. Like the ruler, you will not grow old, nor will you become sick. It is not easy for you to be wounded, nor for you to die. There are also a few illnesses that will only affect kirin."

Taiki suddenly opened his eyes wide and thought for a little bit. "Then... will I grow older and older?"

"After you become an adult, you will then not continue to age."

"...I feel like...this is a little strange."

"The nyosen won't grow old or die of sickness either. I think that they have forgotten to tell you these things... This is pretty much it."

"Okay."

"The sennin support the ruler. Ordinarily, those who serve at the side of the ruler, or the provincial Kou as well as those who serve at the side of the Kou, they are all sennin."

"If only the king can live forever, then he can't accomplish much."

Risai smiled wryly. "I'm not too clear on the reason either. However, sennin won't become old or die of sickness either, but this is only within the time that they are sennin. The difference between the Immortal Register and the Divine Register is that one can enter or leave the Immortal Register at any time. One can decide whether or not they want to be a sennin."

"If you weren't a sennin, then would you grow old like most other people?"

"Yes. Hence, very few people will leave the Immortal Register of their own accord. For instance, I was promoted to general and then entered into the Register, but if I quit or am removed from the position of general, I must withdraw from the Register. In other words, my place in the Register is granted to me by the ruler. All the sennin that work under the king are called chisen."

"Oh..."

"Aside from this, there are people who voluntarily vow to become sennin, those who are not appointed by nor serve under a ruler. These sennin are called hisen. For example, the nyosen of Mt. Hou are considered hisen."

"So that's how it is..." After Taiki said this, he sighed. "Before, I had asked Teiei about her age, and she said that she had forgotten it. Maybe she has really already lived so long that she has forgotten her age."

"Perhaps." Risai smiled slightly. "So, you don't need to worry about my body. Compared to that of a regular person, I am much stronger."

"That's great!"

"That's right, I shouldn't only speak of me. What about you? Your body is all right?"

"Yes, I'm very good. I just feel really tired, and also I'm still afraid of seeing blood. Just those things. Actually, I could have come to see you earlier, but the nyosen wouldn't let me go out."

"I really am very embarrassed..."

Taiki snuck a look at Risai's ashamed face and lowered head. "Madam Risai, this was not your fault. If you must, blame the fact that I am a kirin."

"No..." Risai shook her head but could not speak.

She had taken the Yellow Sea too lightly. She would never have thought the youma that lived in the Yellow Sea would be too vicious even for her. She relied on her incomplete skills, and, full of confidence, she wanted to go and defeat a youma. She really had too low an opinion of her opponent.

--In addition, she was with another who was a general like her, and even if a little bit, she felt competitive with Gyousou. In fact, at the time she had anticipated that the cave would be dangerous, but she did not want others to mistakenly think that she did things hesitantly or that she had no courage.

"I'm really very sorry."

"Ah... I said before that this had nothing to do with you, Madam Risai. Who would have known that a toutetsu would be hiding in a place like that? Also, you even used yourself as a shield and urged me to get out of there quickly. And if this hadn't happened, I would not have understood how to tame shirei."

Risai looked at the child in front of her, who thought up all sorts of things so as she would not feel guilty. "You are too kind..."

"Everything I said was the truth."

Seeing the stern and serious expression on Taiki's face, Risai couldn't help but laugh a little. "I still need to thank you for the Sensui that you brought over. Thanks to your help, I can descend the mountain smoothly when the autumn solstice comes."

Taiki was a little taken aback. "Descend the mountain..."

--Why was this so strange to him? It was a very ordinary thing.

It wasn't as if Risai was like the nyosen and lived on Mt. Hou. The autumn solstice was the next Ankou Day, and when the time came, the Reison Gate on the southeastern side of the Yellow Sea would open.

He calculated that there was only probably half a month's time remaining that Risai would be staying on Mt. Hou.

Then...

Taiki left Risai's tent, and was giving perfunctory responses to the people who were greeting him, when he suddenly stopped.

(Then...)

"What is wrong?"

A pair of hands rested on Taiki's shoulders, and after he came back to his senses, he discovered that it was Gyousou. As if he were unconscious, he had followed the path that he regularly walked and ended up in the area of Gyousou's tent without thinking.

"Oh, it's you, Sir Gyousou."

--It's a good thing Gyousou's still here.

When he realized that Risai and Gyousou would be going down the mountain soon, Taiki felt ill at ease.

Perceiving that he had been staring into space, Taiki felt a little embarrassed and half-heartedly laughed a bit. However, when he saw that Gyousou was wearing his black armor, he wrinkled his brow. This was the attire he had on his body when Taiki had seen him for the first time on Mt. Hou, as well as the time Gyousou had gone hunting for sugu.

"Are you doing all right?"

"Yeah..."

"What is the matter? You have a very serious expression on your face."

Taiki immediately sighed and haltingly said, "I was just thinking that...right now, there isn't even a month's time before the autumn solstice..."

Gyousou nodded in agreement. "It is already time to climb down the mountain. Those friends of mine who are unexperienced in martial skill have said many times that they would like me to decide on a time to descend the mountain."

"Is that so?" Taiki looked at Gyousou's face once again with fresh eyes. "Why are you wearing armor?"

"Ah, this..." Without finishing what he was saying, Gyousou knelt down in submission in front of Taiki. "You've come at just the right time. I was planning on going down the mountain in a short while."

"Huh?" Taiki stared blankly at Gyousou. The words that Gyousou had said to Taiki struck him hard.

His face suddenly lost all color.

"I was just about to go and bid Madam Risai farewell."

"...You're going down the mountain in a short while?"

Gyousou casually laughed a little. "Yes. I intend to search for sugu again on the road back. Many people have said that they wanted to come with me... I had originally thought that I would not be able to run into you again and thus not be able to bid you farewell. This is good that I was able to see you..."

Taiki looked around and discovered that Gyousou's tent had already disappeared. The stake that was used to tie down his mount had also been put away. The area had recovered its flat appearance.

"How did you pick this time to climb down the mountain?"

"This time, horses will be coming with us. If we don't leave now, we will probably not be able to reach the Yellow Sea by nighttime."

"But, isn't the Yellow Sea really dangerous at night?"

Gyousou laughed as he stood up. "If it wasn't at night, then the sugu would be sleeping. In order to catch sugu, we must travel at night."

As Taiki was thinking about how dangerous this was, he immediately remembered that Gyousou was already very used to catching sugu. He had already gone to the Yellow Sea more than a few times to catch sugu, which is how he had been able to catch Keito.

"Then...will you come back when Ankou Day comes again?"

"If we don't manage to catch a sugu on this return trip, then there might be the possibility..."

Taiki wasn't sure if he should say this, but in the end, he couldn't keep it in.

"Then...will you have an opportunity to pass by Mt. Hou?"

Gyousou looked at Taiki.

"No, because there is only one opportunity a year for coming to Mt. Hou like this." He smiled as he reminded Taiki, "First of all, if I really wanted to pass by Mt. Hou, I would have to do it within the length of an Ankou Day."

It wasn't even necessary to think about it. There was no more certain answer than this. Even with Keito, whose speed was like that of the wind, it was an impossibility to make the trip to Mt. Hou from deep within the Yellow Sea in a single day. In order to really meet, they would have to do it before the Reison Gate opened at noon; however, rushing back to Mt. Hou after the hunt at night would be just about the time the door closed.

"...Sir Gyousou, since you are the general of the Oushi, there should be further opportunities for us to meet, right?" Taiki looked up at Gyousou and forced himself to squeeze out a smile. Gyousou laughed bitterly.

"It is possible we will not."

"Huh?"

"I do not plan on returning to the Oushi. I am going to withdraw from the Immortal Register and leave Tai Kingdom."

Taiki unconsciously clenched his hands. "...Why?"

"There is no way for me to endure the feeling of disgrace."

Taiki widened his eyes and then lowered his head.

"I do not mean to blame you. I just do not feel that I ever had the qualities required to be a ruler."

"But..."

"Do not worry. There will always be opportunities for a person like me, and a kingdom that needs to borrow my skills. After all, I am a warrior. I cannot now change and become a merchant."

Taiki lifted his head and looked at Gyousou. "...So you're saying that we will never have an opportunity to meet again?"

"I am afraid so." Gyousou smiled as before.

--It seemed as if leaving Taiki didn't make him sad at all. If Taiki had still been sleeping now, he would probably even have left without saying goodbye and descended the mountain.

"Even if you wanted to go hunt sugu...there's still a stretch of time before the autumn solstice..." It wasn't easy to say something that might persuade Gyousou, who then smiled.

"I cannot do this sort of thing, since I was not chosen, nor do I have any reason to shamelessly linger upon Mt. Hou. I do not want people to mistakenly think that I yearn for the position of ruler and refuse to leave the mountain." After he said this, Gyousou took his big hand and lightly patted Taiki's head. "Do not look so sad. You have nothing to worry about. Believe that you can find somebody who is even greater than I. At the very least, I have now become a bit more modest."

Gyousou laughed, but Taiki could not do the same. Suddenly, they heard a person looking for Gyousou, who then raised his hand and motioned to the other person. He bowed towards Taiki. "I am going now to bid Madam Risai a farewell."

"All right..."

Gyousou left to visit Risai and returned before long. Within this period of time, it was as if Taiki had swallowed a stone. He stood where he was and didn't move.

"Please take good care of yourself. I wish you a long life and prosperity for the

kingdom." Gyousou stood at Keito's side as he said this.

--These were words of parting. As soon as Taiki nodded, Gyousou would grasp the reins and ride away on Keito, and they would never see each other again.

Even in his imagination, it made Taiki feel extremely pained. However, he had no means by which to stop Gyousou.

"So long." After Gyousou paid his respects, he turned around and walked away. Taiki looked at his back. He hoped that Gyousou would turn around and look back at him. But Taiki was very clear on the fact that Gyousou was not the kind of person who would do something like that. If it had been Risai, she would have given honor to a child who admired her and would certainly have delayed a day, or perhaps in the end, for Taiki's sake, she would have stayed until the conclusion of Ankou Day before she left. But this was not something that Gyousou would do.

Gyousou mounted Keito, and after the people around Taiki paid him their respects in succession, they departed one by one. After waiting for everyone to climb on their mounts, Keito started to stride slowly away.

Gyousou didn't look back and headed off without any hesitation.

The moon was out. The moonlight entered through the thin curtains and shone on the bed. Gyousou and the people with him had probably already arrived at the base of Mt. Hou. Was camping going to be dangerous for them? Or were they going to be chasing sugu during the night, waiting until almost daybreak to set up camp?

"You...can't sleep?" Sanshi asked. Taiki unconsciously stop moving his hand, which had been stroking Sanshi's fur.

"Madam Risai's going to be staying for a little bit longer, right?"

"Yes..."

Taiki could not put his mind at rest. He turned about in the bed until he finally couldn't bear it any longer and got out of bed.

"I would like to go on a walk... Can I?"

"You cannot go to the Yellow Sea at night."

With Sanshi having seen through his thoughts, Taiki lowered his head.

"Then...traveling there would be pretty dangerous too, huh?"

"Most likely."

Perhaps they would encounter youma that are like toutetsu. Taiki had previously heard about many people losing their lives on the road to the Yellow Sea. Not to mention the fact that Gyousou's group was not large.

"Gouran."

"Yes?" The sound came from under the bed. Gouran's voice was low and deep. At first Gouran was a little dog, but recently he usually changed into a red dog that Taiki had not anticipated.

"Gouran, can you see Sir Gyousou to the Reison Gate for me? I want him to get there without any trouble."

"I cannot," replied Gouran, strongly and concisely. "I cannot leave Taiki's side."

"You can't...even if I ask you to?"

"Right now, your safety is more important than anything else. Moreover, Gyousou is not the king."

...There it is again. Taiki bit his lip.

Whether it was a way to stop Gyousou from leaving, or trying to find a way to get him to turn back, or even wanting him to reach one of the Four Gates safely, nothing that Taiki did was successful.

If only Gyousou was the king.

Why hadn't there been a revelation? How good would it be if there had been.

(Then...)

Taiki was so sad he almost cried. When certain thoughts appeared in his mind, he would firmly swallow his tears.

(This matter...only kirin know about it...)

Taiki opened up his eyes wide and then hurriedly shut them. His heart was beating very quickly.

(Why are things like this?)

Taiki was also a little surprised. Why was it that whenever he thought about being separated from Gyousou, he would feel so awful inside? The person he had originally liked was Risai, and he had also previously wished that Risai could be the queen. The strange thing was that Risai was going to descend the mountain, but this didn't make Taiki feel that kind of sadness.

He silently got out of bed. He constantly felt an oppressive sensation and lying on the bed was not relieving him of that ache.

"Taiki..."

"I'm just going outside." Wearing his pajamas, he despondently walked down the stone steps of the palace.

There was only one road that one could walk to the foot of Mt. Hou, but once in the Yellow Sea, a countless number of roads extend outwards. Not to mention that Gyousou was going to be hunting as he traveled, so he might not have taken a main road. Once they reach the Yellow Sea, it would be extremely hard to find them.

He would pass through the dangers of the Yellow Sea to get to the Four Gates, and after Ankou Day came, he would go outside of the Kongou Mountains. When that happens, there would be no way to catch up to him.

After Gyousou returns to the Kingdom of Tai, he will resign from his position in the Oushi and leave Tai Kingdom. In the end, no matter where he goes, Taiki would probably not even be able to contact him.

...This could not be stopped now.

Taiki hadn't chosen Gyousou, so he was leaving Tai Kingdom. In this way, with regards to Gyousou, Taiki was but a worthless 10-year-old child. A person like Gyousou, who is unafraid of what lies ahead of him, will probably never condescend to looking back at a worthless person.

There isn't much of a difference between this and a separation by death.

Gyousou's distance from Mt. Hou is increasing step by step, just like he will also slowly forget about Taiki. The link between Gyousou and himself will become weaker and weaker. After one of the Four Gates opens and closes, without a doubt, the connection between him and Gyousou will be severed.

Taiki stood up.

"Taiki!" Sanshi saw Taiki, who had been sitting silently hanging his head, get up suddenly. She hurriedly reached her arms out and wrapped them around his body. "Don't go! The night--"

The night was incomparable to the day. Not to mention that now, it was already very late in the night, just as the shiki was spreading. Thus, youma were becoming more and more active.

"No! Taiki...!"

Taiki shook off Sanshi's arms. He just couldn't bear it. At the thought that he might never have another opportunity to see Gyousou again, he couldn't suppress the agitation in his heart.

"What's going on, Sanshi?" Youka looked out from Rosen Palace to see what was happening. A few nyosen stood behind Youka and watched for further occurrences with doubt all over their faces.

He knew very well that no matter where he ran, the nyosen, Sanshi and Gouran would most certainly try to catch him. However, he still had to go.

Sanshi leapt and landed in front of the fleeing child. In no way could she let Taiki go to the Yellow Sea at night.

Because of the effects of Risai's injuries as well as Gouran's own blood-soaked nature, Taiki had slept deeply for a while. He had finally recovered his energy with some difficulty and was now able to walk around outside. Where there was no strength, there was then no energy. If he encountered a youma now, Taiki did not even have the power now to subdue it.

When their master's strength is weak, the strength of shirei will also become weak. No matter if it's Sanshi or Gouran, their link to Taiki was already

inseparable. Besides the smaller youma, if Taiki encountered a youma that was like Gouran, there would be no escaping from it.

Carrying a mortal determination, she held onto the running Taiki's body, hoping to stop him. "Taiki!"

--He surprisingly eluded Sanshi's obstruction.

Sanshi sprung through the air and looked dully at her own hands. She thought that she had grabbed onto Taiki.

Though she felt a little taken aback, she immediately turned around and reached out for another attempt. She looked at the hand that she thought had gotten a hold of Taiki, but again she was denied success. All the child was doing was running around erratically, hiding here and there, so why couldn't she catch him no matter what she did?

--It's just like the last time! Sanshi suddenly widened her eyes.

This was exactly the same as before during the taming of Gouran. It was as if someone had cursed her. She couldn't get a hold of him regardless of what she tried.

--Why?

Though he was beginning to open his eyes to the powers he possessed, he was still only a small and weak kirin.

"Gouran!" Hearing Sanshi's voice, a beast leapt out from the shadow of a crag and blocked Taiki's path. No one knew what sort of magic Taiki used, but he unexpectedly traded places with the beast that had been blocking him.

Sanshi again leapt through the air and landed in front of the boy, but just as she prepared to stop him, he avoided her. With some effort, she managed to grab onto his wrist, though he almost shook her off. After some tossing about, Sanshi finally took hold of his sleepwear.

"Please, Taiki. The night..." Before Sanshi could finish speaking, the nyosen who were rushing up behind her stopped running and couldn't help but gape.

The pajamas in Sanshi's hand lost the tightness it had from being pulled about,

and fluttered around lightly as it laid in her hand.

"Ah..." Sanshi involuntarily let out a cry of surprise and heard the nyosen make similar sounds. Then, following the lines of sight of the nyosen, she lifted her head.

In the moonlit night, the rocks were black, as were the shadows. Along the lines of the ridge that

made the crags distinct, there was an indistinct silver shape. What the group of people saw was a glowing beast galloping through the night sky.

"Taiki..."

His short mane was the color of steel. The black fur on his back was interwoven with the colors of silver and mica, and his head and hooves were jet black. On his forehead was a short horn of pearl.

--I must catch up to him.

Sanshi held on to the pajamas in her hand tightly.

However, in this world, one could not find a creature that was able to catch up to a kirin at full gallop.

All Taiki could think about was running.

After he had evaded Gouran and shaken off Sanshi's hand, when he began to run, he suddenly felt his body grow much lighter. Having obtained this ability, he ran forward even more quickly. When he realized what he was doing, he had already sped up into the sky.

After a few steps, Taiki discovered that he had transformed. Looking back, he saw only Rosen Palace far behind him.

Taiki did not feel any unease or pain. In his mind, he thought only of running forward, and his four legs shot him ahead.

After another few steps, he had arrived at Hoto Palace. The fires of the torches that the mountain-climbers had lit, left a trail that was dim and far away.

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The first to notice him was the sugu.

Gyousou looked at his own mount. He was just planning on taking advantage of the moonlight to start hunting. He suddenly stopped preparing the saddle.

"What is it?"

The sugu looked up into a corner of the sky and called out deeply from his throat. At first, Gyousou thought it was a night attack by youma. However, the sugu did not appear to be nervous at all.

He squinted, following the sugu's line of sight, and immediately spotted what the sugu was seeing.

Backed by the moonlight, there was a beast that could only be described as graceful, galloping towards him.

--A black kirin!

Just as Gyousou felt like exclaiming, a lingering feeling floated back into his mind. It was because he could not allow himself to feel such attachment to Taiki that he chose to leave the mountain early.

The others who had not yet fallen asleep lifted their heads and looked up into the sky in the same way. And as if they had previously arranged it, they let out a cry of surprise. The kirin's tail was reminiscent

of fireflies, giving off a glow. He finally stopped on top of a rock from which he could overlook the encampment.

The area was a depression surrounded by bushes and rocks, in which there were tents, mounts, as well as people staring dumbfoundedly into the sky and standing in the middle of five lit torches.

"What a...magnificent kirin." The first to speak was Gyousou. He smiled as he spoke, putting the saddle down on the ground. "What is it, Kou? Have you come especially to see us off?"

Taiki hesitated a little before finally deciding to walk down off the crag to stand in the depression. He knew that he was stepping towards a criminal act.

"From appearances, it looks like you can already transform. I am very happy for you. It really is an unexpected honor to have this rare opportunity to see such a

unique sight. It is hard to imagine that this is the Kou."

Taiki had no way of responding.

"Though you already have shirei now, it is still a bit careless. You should hurry and return to the palace." Seeing that Taiki was not going to move, Gyousou took a robe out from his bags. "Or is it that...you have come to see me about something?"

Gyousou spread the robe out and draped it over Taiki's body, who had then undone his beast form. It wasn't clear how he knew how to recover his human form. In reality, it was as if he didn't put any effort into changing back. There was only the sudden feeling that his body had become heavier.

He looked up at Gyousou, who had laid a robe around him. The two looked at each other and Taiki saw only warmth in Gyousou's eyes. There was nothing the least bit frightening about them.

--The fear was within himself. Did he really know what he was doing?

"Sir Gyousou..."

(There was clearly no revelation...)

However, there was no better way than this. Taiki knelt down in submission and Gyousou widened his eyes. "Kou...?"

Taiki bowed his head down low. He was laying prostrate as if he was asking Gyousou to forgive him.

"I will never abandon you...never disobey your royal command...and I pledge my loyalty to you." He had violated the Providence of the Heavens and betrayed the nyosen, the ruler, as well as everyone else.

"This I vow."

(How could I possibly do this...?)

Gyousou was silent for a moment.

With Gyousou's eyes upon him, Taiki felt so bad that he was not able to breathe.

It was not too late now to turn back! Just as Taiki thought this, a calm voice

came from above his head. "I accept."

It was no longer possible to take it back now. Taiki simply lowered his head further. To be in this position was hard to endure.

What a betrayal! For all those who had up until now shown him that much love and concern, for the kingdom, its ruler and its people, and even for Gyousou, it was all a deception for which there was no way out.

Taiki pressed his forehead upon Gyousou's feet. His body was now pierced with the feeling of having committed a crime, and he all he could see in front of him was darkness.

--I want to take it back.

This is all a lie, he nearly shouted. He felt an unreal sense of drifting away, and he stopped himself from almost crying out.

Gyousou helped Taiki get up. Taiki looked at Gyousou in surprise, for the latter had revealed a smiling face.

"Let us forgo formalities... Taiki!"

Taiki didn't know how to respond. The surroundings were stirred up into a commotion. Gyousou picked Taiki up and turned in a circle, letting everyone take a look at him. As if there was nothing else in the world worth feeling pride over than the kirin in his arms, he smiled at Taiki. "Though you are young, you have quite a good eye for things."

Taiki could no longer withstand Gyousou's direct gaze, and by accident his eyes fell upon the arrival of the pursuing Sanshi.

# Chapter 11

--So it turns out that he was the king.

When Sanshi saw Taiki pressing his head near Gyousou's feet, she came to that sudden realization. It was very clear to her that Taiki had felt a sort of fear of Gyousou that he couldn't quite put into words.

Taiki was now already really used to spending time with Gyousou, and he had never originally been the kind that was shy to strangers, so it didn't seem as though this was special. In terms of friendship, it was obvious that he was closer to Risai than Gyousou by far. Thus, that's why the fact that Taiki had been so insistent about going to find Gyousou had quite perplexed Sanshi.

She had followed the spirit of Taiki (in Sanshi's eyes, it was always a golden glow) and chased him to the Yellow Sea, with one part of her mind in doubt.

Why couldn't she catch the running Taiki? Why had Taiki suddenly transformed into a kirin?

Perhaps "will" was the best explanation. The will of Taiki, who had wanted to see Gyousou with all his heart, allowed him to remove with determination any obstructions that hampered him.

--Was it that Taiki had previously subconsciously hesitated in trying to avoid Sanshi's grasp, and so the transformation that had up until today been impossible became possible?

The question was, why was it only when Gyousou was involved that Taiki finally revealed an intense will that didn't quite fit with him?

The feeling that Taiki's appearance gave other people was just like that of a weak, passive kirin. But because of an unknown reason, Taiki had very little confidence in himself. At times, his excessive modesty, on the contrary, let others feel like it was self-loathing.

When a kirin with this sort of personality displays their strong will, they will

always be paired with someone like Gyousou. To Sanshi, Taiki's safety was paramount, regardless of the meaning behind the awakening of Taiki's willpower, his evasion of Sanshi's hand, his subduing of a toutetsu into becoming a shirei, and even the first time he transformed.

There had been no way for Sanshi to clearly see from beginning to end the reasons behind everything that had happened. Perhaps the power that Taiki possessed could not be seen, or there were other, better explanations for this.

She needed only to hide herself in order to more easily attach herself to Taiki's shadow. Wherever he went, she would follow him. Only when she had to stop Taiki would she then appear. Sanshi carried within herself a relentless spirit and leapt across the crags with Gouran. It was not an easy thing to catch up to her master amid the foothills of Mt. Hou.

It wasn't until she saw the scene before her eyes that she completely understood.

--Taiki must have acted in desperation.

He may not have had such deep thoughts and emotions, but being pulled along by a great power that far surpassed his own abilities, Taiki desperately wanted to do what he had set out to do. --It was all because Gyousou was the king.

Sanshi walked into the basin, and Taiki turned to look at her. His face was full of a fear that he couldn't help but show. She smiled at Taiki, and then she made her own body melt into Taiki's shadow.

If Gyousou was the king, why did Taiki still reveal a fearful expression? Why did it take so long before he knew that Gyousou was the king? She was full of questions, but since she had already caught up to Taiki, Sanshi didn't insist on the answers to any of them. This was because, for Sanshi, there was nothing as important as Taiki in this world.

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Gyousou and those with him returned to Mt. Hou and saw the pale-faced nyosen gathered in front of Hoto Palace.

"Taiki...! Everyone was worried to death!"

Seeing Gyousou carrying Taiki down from Keito, Youka immediately rushed forward. "What on earth happened? Why has Sir Gyousou also returned...?"

Gyousou smiled without replying. The servants at Gyousou's side came together to respond in his place. "The Kou came to chase back his master!"

The crowd that had gathered around Hoto Palace began to discuss this one after another, in the end it became a collective cheering.

Youka saw Gyousou smiling from ear to ear and also Taiki, whom Gyousou had brought back, showing a fearful expression.

"His master... Then..." Youka kneeled upon the ground. "Can it be that there was a revelation?"

Taiki couldn't answer her. The attendants beside them made sounds of certainty for him. Following this, they heard even more convincing news.

"He has already given the oath." This was Sanshi's voice.

Youka opened her mouth in surprise. She widened her eyes and looked at Teiei. Teiei nodded with a serious face, and then immediately knelt down. She placed her hands on the ground, and her torso lay prostrate; the surrounding nyosen saw this and followed in succession. "Congratulations, Lord Gyousou."

The man whose hand was upon Taiki's shoulder smiled and nodded.

Not moving from the position she was in, Teiei continued on to say, with a slight quiver in her voice, "Long live King Tai and Tai Taiho."

--At this point, Taiki's crime had already become irreversible.

Gyousou's master and servant residences were very quickly moved into Houro Palace. Gyousou stayed at Tankei Palace, which was situated closer to the outside.

The area that Houro Palace occupies is very broad. Since ancient times, it has always been here that an auspicious day is chosen on which to receive the Tenchoku.

From now on, the manner in which the nyosen treated Gyousou underwent a

complete change. He is considered the superior of the nyosen, as well as Taiki's master. There was no excuse to be inhospitable to him.

A great number of nyosen were dispatched to Tankei Palace in order to serve Gyousou and his attendants. They took care of each and every need of their daily life, from when they got out of bed until they went to sleep. It was simply a dramatic change.

Not long ago, when Gyousou encountered the nyosen, he had to bow. Now, the roles were reversed.

The nyosen had to give Gyousou complete courtesy. It was no longer necessary for Gyousou to pay any sort of respect to any of the nyosen; the same applied even if it was the Mt. Hou Kou. At present, if he stepped outside of Houro Palace, a person who had been his friend of the same generation yesterday, today would have to prostrate themselves in respect.

--Gyousou sat at a supreme status.

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"Congratulations, your majesty." A few days before the chosen auspicious day, Risai had finally come to offer him praise.

"Are you able to get out of bed and walk about now?"

"I am very sorry to have worried you, my lord." Risai bowed and lowered her head, and then faced Taiki. "Congratulations, Taiho."

"Thank you..." Taiki showed a lack of energy, which caused Risai to feel a bit astonished.

"Forgive my rudeness, but might I ask if all is well with the Taiho?"

The child uneasily forced out a sliver of a smile. "Everything's fine... It's just that being called Taiho is a little strange..."

Risai laughed. "I believe that you will become accustomed to it very quickly."

"Yes..."

Risai smiled at the slightly troubled Taiki and then looked up at Gyousou.

"Actually, besides coming especially to congratulate you, I have also come to bid you farewell."

Gyousou furrowed his brow. "Are you leaving the mountain?"

"Yes. On the one hand, I feel as if it is time I should be returning, so I will descend the mountain with those who are leaving tomorrow."

Gyousou nodded. "That's good. You must take good care of yourself. When the time comes, we will meet again in Tai Kingdom."

"Yes. Thank you for your grace."

-----

After the brief meeting, seeing Risai getting ready to leave Tankei Palace, Taiki turned to Gyousou and asked, "Can I see Madam Risai off?"

Gyousou smiled.

"Go ahead." Just as he finished speaking, Gyousou suddenly raised his hand. "Ah, Risai."

"Yes?"

"The Kingun is short one general. What do you think?"

Facing Gyousou's invitation, Risai smiled calmly. "I believe that there must be other candidates more suited to this position than I. Compared to the merits and character of each general, I am lacking by far. I believe that there are more appropriate candidates that my lord should be able to promote."

"I understand." Gyousou smiled just slightly, and with his eyes, he indicated that Risai could depart.

After Risai took a bow and exited the palace, Taiki went after her and caught up with her.

"Madam Risai, don't you want to be a general of the Kingun?" Taiki walked with Risai upon the narrow paths amid the strange crags.

"It is not that I do not want to. I just believe that there should be other candidates who are better than I am. I would like to give the position up to an even more exceptional person."

"Madam Risai, you really are great," Taiki mumbled to himself.

Risai saw that Taiki's face was full of worry and asked with concern, "You seem to be very weary. Is there something on your mind?"

"No."

No matter how she looked at it, it didn't seem as if nothing was wrong.

"Is there something bothering you?" asked Risai once more. Taiki lifted his head and looked at Risai.

"Madam Risai, since Gyousou has turned out to be the king, are you happy?"

Risai blinked her eyes and understood what was troubling Taiki. "Of course I am happy. Do you remember? I had said to you before that Sir Gyousou would certainly make an excellent king..."

"Of course I remember."

"If it had not been Sir Gyousou, and instead been I who was chosen, I do not think that even I could have convinced myself of the fact. To become the ruler of one's own kingdom, you need to have the admiration of the people, as well as their whole-hearted respect. That is what a truly good leader is. You have made the right choice. For that, I thank you."

Taiki wanted to smile, but he couldn't.

"Kou, do not think about it too much. The ruler is decided by the Heavens."

Risai's words of comfort were like a sharp pain stabbing into his heart.

-----

"Taiho, why do you look so unhappy?" asked Gyousou, after he saw Taiki coming back into the palace, having seen Risai off.

"It's nothing."

"It seemed like Risai also felt uncertain... Every time I look at you, I feel as if I had kidnapped you."

"No..."

Youka, who had been at the side holding back, smiled. "However, when the Taiho has to leave Mt. Hou, it will become very lonely here, like when he was still very little, he was initially in Hourai. Then, it wasn't easy to get used to life over here, and now he has to depart again."

Gyousou nodded. But Youka's words shook Taiki's heart. He hadn't even thought of the day he had to leave Mt. Hou and the nyosen. Gyousou beckoned to Taiki.

"...When you were in Hourai, what was your name?" Taiki hesitantly walked to Gyousou's side.

Gyousou laughed, "Everyone calls you Taiho. I fear that asking you to shoulder this great responsibility in such a short time might be overwhelming. Come, tell me your name."

"...Takasato Kaname."

On the palm of his hand, he wrote out the characters of his name. Gyousou laughed. "A very good name. You are literally „important" to Tai Kingdom."  
*[note: the character for kaname can mean 'important.']}*

Taiki shut his eyes.

"Your surname is very interesting. Did you know that there is also a peak on Mt. Hou called Kouri?" *[note: takasato and kouri are written with similar characters.]*

"No."

"It is said that the souls of the dead will return to this place. If you add a grass radical to the 'kou' character, then it is the name of the mountain where the dead reside. The omen would sooner be good than unlucky."

"The dead..."

To the murmuring Taiki, Gyousou nodded his head. "The shiki has finally turned into seiki; and dead things are finally returning to living things. Kouri, I hope in regards to Tai Kingdom, brings a promise of a return to life."

Taiki lowered his head in silence.

For someone who had committed a crime, this was simply a torment that never stopped. However, he could not find any ways by which he could sufficiently make it up.

The auspicious day had finally arrived.

Youka was wearing all black when she came to receive the fully-bathed Taiki, who was wearing his ceremonial attire.

In good times, black is worn; in times of misfortune, white is worn. Taiki was very clear on the fact that these customs were completely opposite to those in Hourai, but in his guilt-ridden heart, he saw the black clothes of the nyosen as if they were suggesting something.

--He didn't feel this was lucky at all.

Youka lay flat on the floor and paid her proper respects. "Tai Taiho, the auspicious time has arrived."

"All right..." For Taiki, this felt like he was about to participate in a funeral procession.

A worried Youka looked up and asked, "What's wrong? Did you not sleep well yesterday?"

Taiki was unable to respond. He hadn't slept at all.

In a moment, he was about to climb to the summit of Mt. Hou with Gyousou. After waiting there and receiving the Tenchoku, Gyousou would formally become king with the approval of the Heavens.

...It's certain that he'll be found out to be a fraud.

Taiki wasn't clear on how the ceremony would proceed. He just knew that the Heavens would certainly not forgive him for the crime he had committed.

Later, it would be charged that Gyousou was not the king, and Taiki would be censured because he had falsely sworn an oath to Gyousou that made him the king.

He could not imagine what kind of punishment awaited him, but this was all Taiki's fault; none of the blame lay on Gyousou. At the right time, he planned to accept responsibility for all of his transgressions. It was not necessary for receive

a condemnation.

With his brain full of such thoughts, there was definitely no way for him to fall asleep.

Youka looked intently at Taiki and reached her hands out while she knelt upon the floor. Taiki silently walked to Youka's side.

Youka gently rubbed Taiki's hair. "It's still too short..."

"Is it?"

"Yes. Don't think that us nyosen didn't notice. It's not easy to change into such a beautiful kirin. It's too bad your mane isn't long enough..."

Taiki comprehended that Youka was referring to his transformation, and couldn't help but nod. "Did you see it clearly?"

The night of the transformation he hadn't thought to give the nyosen a good look at him--whether it was the nyosen or he himself, they had both once anticipated his change.

"Yes. I was very happy." Youka carefully stroked Taiki's hair. "Lord Gyousou is a king you can depend on. This brought me even greater joy."

"Joy...?"

Youka winked. "Of course. It...will be a bit lonely."

Youka was the nyosen closest and kindest to Taiki. She had poured into him so much concern and compassion.

"...Youka." Taiki hugged Youka as she was kneeling on the floor.

--Could it be that this was goodbye?

"Taiki, you must take care of yourself."

I'm sorry... Taiki said, secretly in his heart.

Ever since he had come to Mt. Hou, he had constantly felt sorry for what he put the nyosen through--he had not been able to transform; he wasn't able to subdue a shirei; not to mention his terrible betrayal.

How wonderful would it be if he could start it all over anew? It would be great if he had at first just obediently seen Gyousou off the mountain.

Had that happened, he wouldn't feel this guilty, and he wouldn't have to leave Mt. Hou. It would also have been like before: to go to bed at the urging of Youka's singing, to eat with all the nyosen, to roam around the pathways of the maze with Sanshi--he probably could have continued to lead the life he had previously lived.

Youka lightly stroked Taiki's back, and then pulled him into an embrace.

"It's almost time. We should go."

Taiki was brought to Untei Palace on the south side of Houro Palace, situated at the base of a cliff.

Inside the palace, there was a great crimson gate. When he had nothing to do, Taiki would often walk to various palaces and look around. He remembered that when he had previously seen the gate open, there was a green cliff wall behind it. Now, in place of the wall, there appeared a set of steps.

The steps looked as if they were made out of crystal, and a light passed through from beneath them, brightening up its surroundings. On top of the unusual steps, a white bird that resembled a crow waited for Gyousou and Taiki's arrival.

The nyosen were prostrated and spread out in a row. Gyokuyou bowed deeply towards Gyousou and Taiki as they proceeded to the gate.

"Long live the King and the Taiho."

Gyousou and Taiki returned the bow.

At the white bird's urging, Gyousou took one step up and immediately his back became rigid. In that moment, Taiki was so frightened that the blood left his face, thinking that Gyousou had actually received a punishment. He held his breath and watched for something else to happen. He discovered that nothing unusual occurred. Gyousou continued up the stairs.

It wasn't until Taiki took the first step that he understood why Gyousou's body had suddenly stiffened up.

--It felt like an electrical current passing through.

A stream coursed from the bottom of his feet to the top of his head, and deeply imprinted itself in Taiki's mind:

"It has been said that in the Beginning, there were Nine States and Four Barbarians.

"The Common People did not know of Order. The Son of Heaven knew of Order, but ridiculed it and did not honor it. He spurned the Will of Heaven and Earth, neglected the Way of Benevolence, and exceedingly disregarded Law and Discipline. Every time Smoke took to the Wind, the Ravages of War spread for Thousands of Miles and the Four Corners of the World were covered in Ash. Men and Horses were lost and the Flow of Blood carved out Rivers.

"At this, Tentei felt Sorrow, as He could not find the Way to a Solution and lead them to Order. The People indulged in Obscene Voices and enjoyed themselves selfishly.

"Tentei lamented and sent down a Resolution: I will now completely destroy the Nine States and Four Barbarians, and return to the Past of the Creator. After the Creation of the World, there will be Order.

After the Beginning of Things, there will be Law and Discipline."

It was as if someone was guiding him, and he took another step up.

"Tentei created Thirteen Kingdoms. The Kingdom in the Center was the Yellow Sea and Mt. Hou, and He asked Oubo to protect this Place.

"The Remaining Twelve Kingdoms, He distributed to Rulers, and to each, He bestowed Branches which were the Foundations of Kingdoms.

"Upon the Branch, there was a Snake that held up the Sky.

"Upon the Branch, there were Three Fruit. One Fruit fell and formed the Throne. One Fruit fell and formed the Land. One Fruit fell and formed the People.

"The Branch then transformed into a Jade Brush. This was the Creation."

There was no time to consider the meaning of these things.

"There is One Fundamental Principle. The World must be governed with the Way of Benevolence.

"The People must not be oppressed, War must not be waged, the Taxes must not be severe, nor must the Laws. The People must not be sacrificed, the People must not be enslaved, the Public Land must not be appropriated. The Violation of these is Inexcusable. Follow the Way, and Respect the Virtue. The Peace and Health of the People are the Fortunes of a Kingdom."

With every step he took, more information was written.

"This is no more than: The Duty of the Son of Heaven. The Duty of the Prime Minister. The Formation of the World, the Formation of the Kingdoms, the Formation of the System. What the Way of Benevolence is, what the Rituals are. What must be done, what must not be done. What must be established, what must not be established."

He walked up the stairs as if he were attached to them, and when he came back to his senses, Taiki appeared under the light of the sun. He immediately heard the sound of the red gate closing behind them.

The two were already standing at the top of the steps. The eyes of the white bird that was watching them sparkled in the sunlight.

Just as the closing of the door made that faint sound, Taiki recovered his ability to hear.

At first, the sound of waves came to his ear. He hastily looked around him, and what unfolded in front of his eyes, as soon as he looked, was an endless ocean.

"A sea of clouds..." It wasn't until now that Taiki understood. The sea of clouds in the sky separated the heavens from the world.

Behind Taiki on the small island where he was, there stood a small shrine. The red door of the shrine closed quietly. In front of Taiki were stone steps that led to a grand temple. Around the island, he could vaguely see small islands in the distance that looked like unmoving lotus flowers in the midst of turbulent seas.

He somehow knew then how to proceed. He entered the temple and lit incense for Seiouro and Tentei. Gyousou vowed to obey the Way and follow the Virtue. After this, Genbu appeared and guided them across the sea of clouds to Hakkei Palace in Kouki, the capital of Tai Kingdom.

Taiki was stunned. He knew that his face was most certainly pale.

--It was already over.

Taiki had thought that some sort of ceremony would be held and that his lie would be exposed, whereby he would be punished. He assumed that no matter what form it took, there would have been an opportunity for him to admit his wrongdoing. He hadn't imagined that there would not be one.

It had been the climb up the transparent steps and the comprehension of Tentei's ideas and meanings that was the so-called reception of the Tenchoku.

Now, Taiki felt that his crime had become more serious. He had not had an opportunity to make up for his mistake. On the other hand, Taiki understood the significance of the ruler.

His duties were extremely important. A ruler didn't just govern the kingdom; he existed to protect the kingdom. The ruler had to keep his kingdom's Onmyou in balance and judge the Hakke. The ruler's conduct and behavior will influence the direction of his kingdom's destiny.

Taiki looked up at his master, who was gazing silently and thoughtfully at the sea of clouds.

The ruler's very existence protected the kingdom and allowed the people to live peacefully.

Taiki suddenly became dizzy.

--Under this false king's rule, what course will the destiny of Tai Kingdom take?

Taiki's chest flooded with regret and despair as he watched Gyousou swear the oath.

--At that exact same time...

Tai Kingdom is located in the northeast part of the world. In its capital on the top of Kouki Mountain, there stood Hakkei Palace. Within the palace, Nisei

Palace resided, from which a sound flowed out.

Nisei Palace is a small palace, in which the master of that palace lived with ten attendants who saw to the daily life of the master.

Inside Nisei Palace, a resounding call suddenly rang out. This sound came from the palace master: a Hakuchi, a White Pheasant.

"The White Pheasant has called out!" One of the attendants was full of joy, as he shouted while he ran outside of the palace. "It has made the First Sound!"

The attendant's voice reached everywhere and caused a great commotion. Before long, the entire royal palace was cheering.

In the White Pheasant's life, it only calls out twice, and these two sounds represent two different meanings. Because of this, the White Pheasant is also called Nisei, Two-Sounds.

The first time he cries out is called the "First Sound," and the second time is called the "Second Sound." A White Pheasant that finishes its second call immediately dies on the spot; thus, the Second Sound is also called the "Ending Sound."

The First Sound is "Sokui," ascension to the throne. The Second Sound is "Hougyo," the death of the ruler. The White Pheasant's entire life is for the sake of making these two calls.

The White Pheasant of Hakkei Palace was born ten years ago. Until today, it had not yet cried out.

--That is to say, this was its First Sound.

"The White Pheasant has called out! It has made the First Sound!"

The sound passed from the living quarters of the Inner Halls all the way to the governing offices of the Outer Halls. There wasn't a place where there were not continuous sounds of joy.

"King Tai has ascended to the throne!"

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At the same time, in Gyouten, the capital city of the eastern Kei Kingdom, its own royal palace, Kinpa Palace also received the news.

"Open the door, Godou Palace!"

Hearing this, Keiki lifted his head up.

While laying on the floor, Keiki turned his head; Queen Kei, who had originally been listening to Keiki giving her the reports of the Rokkan, the Six Ministers, also looked up in curiosity.

A lady-in-waiting anxiously opened the window.

In an instant, a bird flew in from the window and rested on a gold-colored branch that was originally in the room already.

"The White Pheasant has called out!"

The master of Gudou Palace was a Hou, a Male Phoenix. Both a Hou and an Ou, a Female Phoenix, lived in Gudou Palace. The Hou could communicate with the Hou of other kingdoms, and the Ou called out when something important happened in another kingdom.

The Ou shouted loudly, "The First Sound has occurred in Tai Kingdom. King Tai has ascended to the throne."

Keiki held a steady gaze at the Ou, and the faintest smile rose to his face.

Queen Kei Jokaku saw the kirin of her kingdom reveal a smile that was hard to come by and was immediately dumbfounded.

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It was after these things happened that Youka looked up into the sky while she was standing in the small paths in Houro Palace.

In the clear blue sky, looking from the summit of Mt. Hou to the northeast, she could see a line of auspicious clouds. It's just that Youka didn't know that that was actually the trail left behind by Genbu's flight across the sea of clouds.

Youka gazed at the clouds, lost in thought, while the few nyosen at her side did the same and watched the sky.

"Taiki..." She had never thought that that beloved child would leave them so soon.

That the festival was so short was a little regrettable, as the lonely seasons were coming to Mt. Hou.

--It could be a very long time until the next fruit of the kirin developed.

# Chapter 12

The Kingdom of Tai is located in the northeast. Its capital is Kouki. Only a day and a night had passed when Genbu arrived at the top of Kouki Mountain, which rose high into the sky.

Genbu was actually a giant turtle about the size of a small island. Before Gyousou and Taiki left the temple, he had waited in the sea of clouds. He motioned to the master and servant to climb onto his shell by way of his head, which was resting on the shore and looked like a great crag. His shell felt like stone and was covered with countless rocky protrusions. He felt a lot like Mt. Hou. It was not known where Genbu came from. His neck and shell were not the slightest bit damp. In the middle of the shell, there was a very small palace hall. There was no one inside, as if it was there for a night's stay and rest.

In the journey of this turtle--it wouldn't be right it a boat--Hakkei Palace, the royal palace of Tai Kingdom had already begun preparing various items for the welcome of the king.

Taiki stood in the front part of the shell, and the first thing that entered his view was a steeply shaped small island. As they became closer, he discovered that on the horseshoe shaped island, along the bay, there were an unclear number of towering buildings.

The walls and the pillars and railings were all white. The blue of the roof was deeper than that of Houro Palace. The winds around the inlet were still and tranquil. The images reflecting off of the surface of the water looked from the air like a beautiful painting.

"That is Hakkei Palace. It is beautiful, is it not?"

A little lost in thought, Taiki nodded at the sound of Gyousou's voice.

"Those are the Outer Halls of the government. The ones on the other side should be the Inner Halls."

Gyousou raised his hand and gestured.

"Kouri, when the time comes, you will live in Jinju Hall. It is over there."

Gyousou pointed at a structure by the water.

"I'm living there too? Don't I serve you?"

"Yes, Kouri. Although it can be said that you are a minister, you are not like the other ministers. If we were to use a boat as an analogy for the kingdom, the ruler is the sail and the kirin is the anchor. One cannot be without the other."

"Yes..."

Genbu finally arrived at the inlet. A countless number of flags had been placed all around the royal palace. A great number of people were arranged neatly in front of the big structure, all prostrating on the ground. For the second time, Genbu rested his head on the shore to let the two disembark.

Passing through the prostrated crowd, the two people proceeded towards the palace in the front. They received the congratulations of the group of people, however Taiki was in a state of dismay.

Whether if it was those who knelt before him or those who served him, he had long gotten used to it.

He was already accustomed to a life of luxury. The standard of the things prepared in the royal palace were far from that of Houro Palace.

He wanted badly to call Sanshi to come out and hold his hand. But Youka had already told him time and time again that when he chose a ruler and left the mountain for his home kingdom, he would be considered an adult. Sanshi no longer performed the role of his wet nurse, but that of a shirei. A shirei could not be called out in the midst of a crowd as he pleased.

Thus, only after an entire day of ceremony ended and after he returned to his room and let the curtains above his bed down was he able to really relax.

"Sanshi..."

Eight attendants lived in the room next door and satisfied Taiki's requests as necessary. So, he quietly called out Sanshi's name.

"Is everything all right?"

Every time Sanshi would immediately appear in front of Taiki, yet this time, he heard only her voice, but he didn't see her.

"Sanshi."

"You are already an adult. I cannot appear whenever you call me."

"You can't?" Taiki sat on a big blanket, though the blankets at Rosen Palace were much bigger than this.

"Although you cannot see me, I will always be by your side."

"But..."

"Goodnight."

Since this was all Sanshi said, there was nothing for Taiki to do but to lay down obediently, but he wasn't tired at all.

Suddenly, he smiled. He could feel two hands reach out from under the bedding with his fingers. He knew those were Sanshi's hands.

Sanshi's hands tightly held Taiki's hands

"...Goodnight."

"Hnn."

It was very hard for him to calmly close his eyes. He slept very shallowly. Even the dream he had was very clear in Taiki's mind. It had been a nightmare.

When a kirin arrived in his native kingdom, he assisted the ruler in governmental affairs in his position as Saiho. It didn't matter how old or young he was, the kirin could not avoid the responsibility he was born into.

Taiki had to begin playing the role of Saiho.

When the time came, he had to get out of bed and put on clothes that conformed with the protocol of his position; when the time came, he had to go to the Outer Halls and attend the Morning Council. After that, it was necessary for him to be present at the king's side and assist in government. For the time being, he could only sit at one side and listen, because that was the kirin's responsibility and duty.

After midday had passed and the afternoon's work was finished, the king

would retire to his quarters.

The Saiho could then also retire to his own room, but until Gyousou went to bed, he did not leave his side.

Currently, Gyousou's first order of business was to prepare for his own coronation ceremony.

On another side, he also had to formulate a new organization. Of the things that the previous king had left behind, the things that should be kept will be kept, and the things that should be discarded will be discarded. Other things like the appointments and dismissals of the ministers and the modifications of law are also quite important issues.

"How do you want to address the Daishi's complaints?"

Gyousou laid on a couch in his room as he looked over official documents. Taiki sat on the floor nearby.

"Pay no attention to him."

It was because the previous king was excessively extravagant that he eventually lost his way.

Gyousou understood that for this reason, he had to reduce the number of those who served him to as few as possible. As a result, many attendants and court ladies did not have much to do. Even the palace halls not frequently used were locked up.

The Daishi was the head of the palace musicians. He complained that the king had dismissed too many musicians.

"I am a military man after all. I will simply tell him that I do not understand music."

"...But, it will also be difficult for those people who were dismissed..."

"Do you know how many musicians the previous king left behind?"

Taiki shook his head. "No."

"I do not know either. However, I am certain the number is extraordinarily

high. It seemed like every time I went into the Inner Halls, a different piece of music would rise out of each palace hall. Also, there was never a break in the music over the course of an entire day. The musicians would play, regardless of whether or not the king was in the Inner Halls or not. We could even hear the music during the Morning Council."

"Is that so...?"

"The talented musicians in the palace should have no trouble finding other employment. We will keep a few of the best musicians here. After all, when there are guests visiting, we will want some music as to not be too improper."

"The Daishi says that there are too few musicians to perform at the coronation."

"It does not matter. In any case, Tai Kingdom is not extraordinarily wealthy."

"The Spring Minister also says that it is the coronation of the king after all. The production standards cannot be too low."

The Shunkanchou, the Spring Minister, was one of the Six Ministers. He oversaw ritual and ceremony.

"If people feel that it's inadequate, then we will let them. They are only those who put on airs. The previous king was wasteful. The treasury of the kingdom is empty. The warehouses are full of debt contracts."

"Yes..."

Taiki was young and did not yet understand the infrastructure of government, much less the arrangement of adult society. The current situation in Tai Kingdom was not very optimistic.

Contrary to what was going on, in regard to the ins and outs of the high officials in the Inner Halls,

Gyousou didn't actually require Taiki's suggestions--Taiki himself was very clear on this.

"Do we need to find a completely new, suitable candidate for the position of Spring Minister?"

Gyousou mumbled to himself as he glanced over official documents. Taiki

watched him. "Because the previous king liked extravagant ceremonies, I worry that the current Spring Minister also favors an excessive style."

"...But, I don't think we need to replace him so quickly..."

Gyousou looked at Taiki and smiled. "You have a point. For the time being, we'll first observe the Spring Minister's performance."

Taiki lowered his head. Seeing Gyousou's smile, Taiki knew that it meant he had given in to Taiki.

"...I'm sorry. I've said too much..."

"There is no such thing. I should thank you for your questions, Taiki. They help me calm my mind."

Taiki knew that Gyousou was just saying these things to comfort him. "...I'm sorry..."

Seeing Taiki hanging his head, Gyousou stood up. "Kouri... What are you worrying about? Can you tell me?"

Hearing Gyousou ask this, Taiki hurriedly shook his head. "It's nothing."

Gyousou put down the documents he had been glancing over and suddenly embraced Taiki. "Is it that...you long for Mt. Hou?"

"That's not it..."

"If you miss the nyosen, just tell me. You are a little bit too polite."

"I don't..."

"Then...what is the reason you are so miserable? You do not have to say that it is nothing. You are still young. It is not necessary to force yourself to do this."

Taiki didn't know how to reply to this.

"When the coronation ceremony is over, I will send you immediately to Kei Kingdom, so that you can visit with Kei Taiho."

"That's not the reason either..."

"Or do you think that I am incompetent? That it makes you so uncomfortable

to have given the kingdom to me?"

Taiki shook his head, even though that was not necessarily untrue. He felt as though it was his duty to watch over Gyousou. He didn't let Gyousou out of his sight for even a moment. It wasn't because he didn't trust in Gyousou's character; it was just that he was worried Gyousou might accidentally make an error in judgement.

--After all, there had been no revelation for Gyousou.

Gyousou looked at the child in his arms and saw a severe look on his face. In his mind, he secretly knit his brow.

What was it that was bothering Taiki so much? It did not seem as simple as that he just missed the nyosen. Or was it that he had suddenly taken on such a great responsibility? Or... When he thought back on it, after he had met Taiki for the first time at Mt. Hou, he wasn't sure if he was just being overly suspicious, but it seemed as if Taiki had become more and more anxious as the days passed by.

Gyousou set Taiki back on the floor.

"In conclusion, I would like you to rest thoroughly. There is no reason for you to accompany me until late at night."

"It's all right."

"I do not think it is all right. Do you realize how unhealthy your color is?"

"No... I..."

Gyousou placed his hand on the apprehensive child's head. "This is a command. Today, you may go back to your palace. For now, I am allowing that you do not need to leave your palace until the afternoon."

"Your majesty..."

"I promise you that before I make any sort of decision, I will discuss it with you first. Thus, for the time being, rest up a bit. Your response?"

Taiki looked at the floor. "Yes..."

Besides assisting the king, the Saiho's responsibility included another duty, which was that of the Shukou of Zui Province.

Jinju Hall was where Taiki lived, but at the same time, it was the seat of government for Zui Province.

Ordinarily, he would use the short period of time in the afternoon to handle the affairs of government.

Though this was the case, a kirin was part of the king's division, so in reality, the rule of Zui Province was still under the control of the king.

Now, after receiving the Tenchoku, he knew just the slightest bit about governing a kingdom, but other than that, most of the time, he actually understood very little about what was said. In fact, his handling of government affairs only involved him listening silently to the reports of the officials and asking questions about things he didn't understand. He spent a majority of his time in study.

When Gyousou had time, he would visit Jinju Hall. Occasionally, he would interrupt and say something or he would watch Taiki from the side. Afterwards, when Gyousou returned to the Inner Halls in order to continue his own work, he would steadfastly prevent Taiki from following him back. At this, having no alternative, Taiki would then spend much of the afternoon in his own palace hall idling.

At first, there were eight people here attending to Taiki. After the drastic reduction in personnel, there were left only two. Considering that in the past, Taiki had spent most of his time with nyosen, the remaining two were both court ladies. This point was probably Gyousou's meticulous arrangement. For dinner, Gyousou did not forget to find Taiki to eat with, which also showed that Gyousou was thinking of Taiki.

Taiki took everything that Gyousou did to heart. On the other hand, Taiki felt even more like he couldn't take it easy.

The better Gyousou treated Taiki, the more Taiki felt like he was being forced into a corner.

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On another afternoon of continuous sighing, Taiki was suddenly called on by Gyousou, who had returned to the Inner Halls.

Taiki rushed hurriedly to the Inner Halls--at this time, there were only a few days left before the auspicious day of the coronation ceremony.

"Taiho, you have a guest visiting." There was a visitor room that was used to receive guests from other kingdoms. Gyousou stood in this room on the other side of the open door.

It was rare for him to address Taiki as Taiho in a large crowd of people, and after Gyousou turned his head back, Taiki could see a devious smirk on his face.

"A guest...?" What sort of guest could it be? Taiki cocked his head and tried to figure it out.

Suddenly, he sensed something around him.

He felt like something was nearby in his periphery. He looked around carefully again and caught sight of one faintly-glowing, golden bubble floating around. The bubble looked as if it was being pulled along by a very light and thin sash, floating up and down.

Taiki's heart began to race. Could it be the visitor he was thinking of...?

He ran into the room. The person standing inside made Taiki's eyes light up. "...Kei Taiho!"

Keiki smiled a little and then respectfully nodded to him. "I'm very happy to see that you have descended the mountain and arrived at Tai Kingdom without any trouble."

Taiki stopped running. He didn't dare to look directly at Keiki's face. "Th...thank you..."

Keiki looked on with surprise at the child who was hiding his face. He couldn't help but be suspicious of Taiki's change. He understood now why Gyousou had specifically asked for him to come.

It was basic etiquette to avoid as much as possible a visit before his enthronement; furthermore, rulers and kirin actually have very little involvement

with other kingdoms. In reality, those who had a friendship with Keiki were only those who had helped him when he went in search of his ruler. They were King En and Enki from the neighboring kingdom.

Gyousou was an important official of the previous king. There was no reason for him not to know these customs. For him to break past conventions and especially invite Keiki for this meeting, it was not hard to understand his reason.

"You see? It's like I had said previously. I am the first to come and see you. Are you still doing well?"

"Yes."

The expression on Taiki's lowered face was grave. Even when he raised his head, there wasn't even a glimmer of joy in his eyes.

"But I don't feel that you are... Did you encounter some situation that has made you worry?"

"No..."

Gyousou knitted his brow as he watched the two and suddenly interrupted, saying, "I think that the two of you should have much to say to each other. I will ask to be excused for the time being."

Keiki nodded in respect. Taiki could only do as Keiki had done and nodded to Gyousou.

Following this, Gyousou probably returned to all that complicated work that was waiting for him.

Taiki knew very well in his mind that even had he asked to go with Gyousou, Gyousou would not have permitted it. Moreover, today, a guest had arrived.

Gyousou lowered his head lightly and immediately exited. After Keiki saw Gyousou leave, he turned toward Taiki and said, "Would you like to take me to the garden for a walk?"

"Okay... But...I don't really know where it is."

"Are you telling me that you have been so busy that you haven't had a chance to stroll around?"

Taiki stopped his hand as it was about to open the door to the garden. He didn't know how to respond to Keiki.

"The wind in Tai Kingdom is very cold." In the garden of the Inner Halls, there was an enormous pond. Keiki stood at the water's edge. "Would you like to sit for a bit?"

After he said this, he looked behind at the trembling Taiki.

There was an magnificent pavilion nearby that amazed anyone who looked upon it. It was built by the previous King Tai, and whether it was the floor or the pillars, it was all made of crystal. Around the pond, there had been plans to create pavilions in the same design with smoke crystal, yellow crystal, red crystal and purple crystal. The four pavilions were in the middle of building, when the previous king died and construction was halted. It had been neglected up until the present time.

"Gems are produced in Tai Kingdom... It's no wonder there hasn't been a way to stop the internal turmoil." Keiki touched one of the giant pillars made out of crystals.

The climate of Tai Kingdom is bad; no one is willing to plant crops. However, in Tai Kingdom there are countless gem springs, and so the people can be considered fairly wealthy. As the name suggests, they are springs that can produce precious gems. All one has to do is place into the spring a gem as if it were a seed, and it will grow into a giant crystal. In Tai Kingdom, gold springs and silver springs are also quite common.

"For one this big, it probably took at least thirty year's time to produce."

It is said that there is nothing left in the treasury of the kingdom.

Even under the rule of such a king, the authority of the government was able to continue for over a hundred years. It was probably due to the fact that he didn't muddle together his pleasure with the business of government. The old king had a group of attendants and court ladies that he had fun with, but he didn't thusly promote these people and give them official positions, nor did he allow them to participate in the governing of the kingdom.

"Are you lacking something?" Keiki looked at Taiki, who was silently standing at

one side.

"No..."

"Tai Taiho, what's bothering you?"

"Nothing..." Taiki's responses were as if he was thinking aloud. His expression was as severe as before. Keiki got the feeling that Taiki was not telling him the truth.

"I've heard King Tai say that you've subdued a shirei."

"Yes."

"And that you can transform."

"...Yes."

"It is regrettable."

Taiki looked back at Keiki uncertainly. There was only a self-deprecating smile on Keiki's face.

"I came to see you as we had agreed. I thought that you would be happy to see me."

Taiki lowered his head.

"It really is too bad."

His calm voice stabbed Taiki in the heart.

He was finally meeting with someone he had wanted to see, but he couldn't bring himself to be happy about it. He felt miserable.

Regardless of who it was, even if it was a court lady, he would feel ashamed and not be able to look at them directly. He really didn't know when he would be able to sleep peacefully, or when his conscience would stop torturing him, or when he would be able to hold a proper conversation with someone.

--This is my punishment. Until my crime is exposed, I will suffer without end. Taiki knew that he didn't have the right to cry, but the tears came flowing out anyway.

"Taiki..." Keiki reached out and placed Taiki's hands on his knees, and then gently stroked his head.

Taiki took the opportunity to rest his head on Keiki's knees.

"What has happened?" Keiki's voice was without intonation; his words were full of calm.

"...Taiho...have you ever regretted being a kirin?"

"I haven't."

"...Then...have you ever regretted the selection of your ruler?"

"No."

Taiki looked up. "But, I heard that things weren't the happiest between Kei Taiho and Queen Kei."

"Who did you hear that from?"

"The nyosen, they..."

Keiki sighed. Queen Kei had now completely given up on the affairs of government. She had lost her ruling platform and the kingdom's political situation was in great disorder. The lords looked down on the queen, and the officials were even more tyrannical.

"I have already sworn a vow. I have devoted my life to her, and I cannot abandon her. No matter where my queen goes, even if she does not want me to, I must follow her regardless."

--However, the problem was that the hardship that came from following her was difficult to endure.

Taiki looked at Keiki with his deep black eyes, and then moved his line of sight back toward the ground.

"...If only I could be as certain about things as you, how nice that would be."

"Taiki, do you feel regret?"

Hearing Keiki ask this so plainly, Taiki felt a little flustered.

"Yes..."

Keiki simply tilted his head and didn't say a thing. There wasn't any expression on his face either.

At this point, Taiki couldn't hide it any longer.

"I...have done something so wrong there's no saving me." The little kirin lifted his head, and his expression was that of despair. "I...didn't receive a revelation for the king..."

Keiki was so surprised he didn't know what to say. Taiki's confession was far from anything he had imagined. "No...revelation?"

Taiki nodded. "There wasn't any sort of sign. I didn't see any kind of ouki either. At one time, I had even told him that I wished him well, that he wasn't the one."

"...Why did you?"

"At the time...I really didn't want to be separated from Gyousou." The child who was staring down, lifted his head up and looked at Keiki.

"What...should I do?" The hands that had grabbed onto Keiki's knees were trembling slightly. "What should I do to fix my mistake? How do I make up for this?"

"Taiki..."

"It's all fake! What's going to happen? Will Tai Kingdom be destroyed? Will the king be punished? When everyone finds out about this, what will the response from the Heavens and the people be?" Taiki's tears flowed continuously.

Keiki was about to say something, but in the end, he closed his mouth. He lightly patted the hands at his knees and then stood up. Sitting on the floor of the pavilion, Taiki looked up at him. Keiki nodded in respect. "I'm not sure what to say... For today, I will bid you farewell."

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Taiki hugged his knees as he sat in the corner of the pavilion and watched the golden hair getting farther and farther away.

Was Keiki disappointed in him? He would probably never want to see him

again.

Was this going to become rumor? Or was his deception going to be revealed?

--When the time came, how would Gyousou deal with Taiki's betrayal?

# Chapter 13

When Keiki called upon Taiki again, a couple days had already passed.

It also seemed as though he hadn't informed Gyousou of the matter regarding the revelation, because on that same day during dinner, he hadn't noticed any change in Gyousou's mood. Taiki couldn't help but sigh in relief, though on the other hand, he also couldn't avoid feeling disappointed.

As he was spending his time in the afternoon worried like he had been before, a messenger came from the Inner Halls and requested that he change into formal dress and go to the visitor room. Therefore, Taiki hurriedly made his way to the Inner Halls and discovered Gyousou and Keiki waiting with him, along with two other people.

The man sitting in the center of the room looked of a similar age to Gyousou. It also seemed like this person was a very important guest. Standing at the man's side was a youth who was probably a little older than Taiki.

Like Keiki, the youth had a head of golden hair, which appeared to shine and give off a faint, golden glow--or at least that's how it looked to Taiki's eyes. There was also a similar golden glow emanating around Keiki; perhaps this was the so-called kirin spirit. From this, Taiki had guessed that the youth was some kingdom's kirin.

--He could now see the spirit of kirin.

After Taiki paid his respects at the entrance, he looked at Gyousou. There wasn't anything surrounding Gyousou that he would call ouki.

He walked inside and kneeled down, waiting for further instructions. Keiki motioned for him to come closer. "I have brought King En and En Taiho for a visit."

Taiki opened his eyes widely.

(King En...)

It was not hard to understand why Gyousou was sitting in a lower position.

Taiki knelt upon the floor and lightly bowed his head. According to custom, when facing a ruler, one must bow very respectfully. One must be kneeling with both hands on the ground and with his forehead to the floor. However, for only kirin, it's necessary simply to gently bow one's head.

"Ah... How do you do?" Taiki knew very clearly how to pay his respects, but he didn't know what sorts of pleasantries he should say in these situations, so he just said as he did.

Gyousou whispered to Taiki, "Kouri, you must kowtow."

"Eh...?" Taiki looked at Gyousou disconcertedly.

"The length of King En's reign is only second to that of King Sou. We cannot treat him the same way as the other rulers."

"But..."

Taiki looked in dismay at the other two kirin, and whether it was Keiki or Enki, neither of them contradicted Gyousou's words.

"Yes... Excuse me."

Taiki hastened to put his hands on the floor and lowered his head again.

Just as he was preparing to bow down and touch his forehead to the floor, he stopped in halfway through the action.

"What is it?" asked King En, who was sitting in front of him.

"Nothing," replied Taiki. He tried once more to lower his head, but he stopped halfway down, like before.

--It wasn't possible.

"What is it? Does the Kirin of Tai Kingdom have something against En?"

"No." Taiki looked for help, but all he saw was Gyousou's face becoming grim.

"Taiki, what are you doing?" asked Gyousou harshly. Taiki had only to try again. He could only lower his head halfway, and then it wouldn't go any further. No

matter how hard he tried, he could not get past his elbow. It was as if there was something solid in that distance; no amount of effort allowed him to move. Besides not being able to kowtow, he was also unable to bend his arms.

"Oh...? It looks like you really do have something against us."

King En's voice sounded very cold. Taiki hastily looked up at him.

"No...!"

Standing at King En's side, Enki said frostily, "You can't even show the least bit of etiquette? There's no reason for King En to personally come to Tai Kingdom. It was at Kei Taiho's request that King En made this special trip, all to receive this rude treatment?"

With a caustic smile, King En said, "This is the first time a new kirin has shown me such disrespect.

It seems like Taiki dislikes En. Or is it...that King Tai ordered him to do this? Has he forbid you to compliment me?"

"Never..."

Taiki saw only solemn faces around him; no one was willing to offer him a helping hand.

"If that isn't the case, then I'd like to hear you explain it to me. If you can't give me a reason and don't bow to me, then I will take this as a sign of hostility from Tai towards En!"

"Taiki!" From Gyousou came a reprimand.

Taiki hurriedly tried once more to kowtow, but there was simply no way for him to lower his head.

He couldn't shorten his distance to the floor at all. He didn't know why his body wouldn't listen to his mind.

Taiki started to sweat, not because he was anxious, but because this was laborious. One by one, droplets of sweat hit the floor. Even his breathing became hard to do.

King En stood up. Out of the corners of his eyes, Taiki discovered that he was

walking towards him.

"What is it? Can't you even pretend to pay me respect?"

Just as this voice fell above his head, his hair was grasped. King En was now pushing down on him with a terrible force.

"As it is, all you have to do is lower your head. Surely it can't be that hard?"

Taiki himself could not say why he was resisting his power. He knew he couldn't withstand King En, but his entire body began enduring his might.

"So stubborn..." Saying this, King En began pushing harder.

Suddenly, that pressure disappeared.

"That's enough!"

Hearing the sound of a crisp slap, Taiki realized that the feeling of his hair being grasped disappeared. He looked up to see Enki knocking away King En's hand.

"How can you do this to a child? Taiki, are you okay?"

Taiki took deep breaths as he looked confusedly at Enki.

"Ah... You're so pale... Can you stand up? Do you want to lie down?"

Enki didn't mind using his sleeves to wipe the sweat off of Taiki's face. Keiki held Taiki up, for whom standing was not easy.

"Are you all right? Sit down for a little bit..."

At this moment, King En was a little stunned and a little interested as he watched Taiki and the others.

"It's so heartwarming to see such love between members of the same type..."

"You moron! You're the one who went too far! An idiot like you, you were a complete bastard!"

Taiki stared absentmindedly at the three.

"I knew you were reckless, but I didn't think you could be this rash!"

"You were the ones who suggested it..."

"I didn't ask you to abuse him like this!"

"There are limits to everything!"

Both Keiki and Enki relentlessly yelled at Enki, who shrank back.

"Then...?"

King En smiled at Taiki as he was about to ask a question, and said, "Do you understand?"

Taiki didn't have a chance to ask any questions.

"Kirin cannot swear false oaths."

Enki knocked King En roughly on the head, and the latter's expression became much softer.

"Don't say it as if you can see from the king's position!"

The wind blew across the terrace. Taiki sat in a chair and Keiki knelt in front of him, their eyes at exactly the same level.

"I'm very sorry. I wasn't clear enough before." He gently took Taiki's hand. "When you asked me about what the revelation was, I should have explained it to you better. I had no idea that it would have caused you so much hardship. Please forgive me."

"Taiho... I..."

"The revelation doesn't take any sort of shape." Keiki smiled. "It's impossible to explain the revelation in words, because nothing really happens, Taiki."

Taiki looked directly at Keiki. "Nothing...?"

Keiki also looked directly at Taiki and nodded. "That's right. The ruler has ouki. However, ouki isn't something you can see."

"It's not like a light?"

Since the time that Keiki had told Taiki that the kirin spirit was a glow, Taiki kept thinking that the ouki would appear like this as well.

"The ouki might feel like a light, or it might feel like a darkness. The ouki might also be a burst of ambition. On the other hand, it might also be something that makes you feel safe."

"So, the ouki doesn't take a set form?"

"Actually, it's very hard to describe it in words."

"But...Kei Taiho, didn't you say before that you used the ouki to find your ruler?"

"Yes. If the ruler isn't far away, you can feel it very obviously. Then you will know what direction the ruler should be in."

"What direction..." Taiki thought back. Before the mountain-climbers gathered at Hoto Palace, how often did he get that feeling? That overwhelming sensation, if he had to say it, had been a scary and overpowering feeling.

"When you encounter the ruler, then you'll know exactly where that feeling is coming from. You'll have a vague sense that it is the same kind of spirit."

"...And that's what ouki is?"

"Yes. The ouki is a very clear feeling. This sort of feeling is very different compared to that of other people. It's something you can't see, and something that is impossible to explain in words."

Taiki gently balled his hands into fists. Keiki comfortingly patted his hands.

"The revelation is much the same way. Nothing will specifically happen. If I had to express it in words, I'd call it an intuition. When you meet your ruler, you will have that kind of intuition, Taiki."

"Intuition..."

Keiki nodded. "I'll be honest with you. When I met Queen Kei, I knew for certain that it was her. But at the same time, in my mind I knew that she wasn't someone who was suitable to be queen. I also knew that in order for her to become a good and wise ruler, I had to make many sacrifices, and at the same time, I had to have a strong perseverance, all to make up for the things that she was not good at."

"Really...?"

"I knew that she was not right for this, but I could not defy her. Instinct had told me that I couldn't resist the revelation. Even if you hated them, there's no way for a kirin to refuse. Because that is what the Heavens have decided."

A pair of hands were placed on Taiki's shoulders. He looked up and saw a smiling Gyousou.

Gyousou knew now. He had already been told Taiki's confession.

"The selection that a kirin makes, that is the revelation, Taiki."

"I..." Taiki finally felt a heavy burden lifting from his heart. "The first time I met Lord Gyousou, I was really scared..."

"Yes."

"Before Lord Gyousou climbed the mountain, I kept having this feeling...as if something scary would come from the Reikon Gate..."

Had Taiki not felt fear initially, but instead a light, a hopefulness, or a more obvious sensation, perhaps Taiki would not have been so lost.

"I knew in my heart that he wasn't the sort of person who did frightening things, but I was afraid of him anyways. I also knew that he was a good, amazing person, but I was still scared."

"I see."

"Sometimes, I was really scared of him, but whenever I thought about meeting him, I felt really happy, and when I knew that I wouldn't see him, I would feel lonely. That's why when I heard that he was leaving Mt. Hou, I felt so terrible inside."

Keiki nodded. "But that's a very good thing. There isn't a kirin who feels sadness when he is by his ruler's side, and on the opposite side, there isn't a kirin who won't be unhappy when he is away from his ruler. A ruler and his kirin are inseparable."

"Yes..."

"A kirin is only a vehicle through which the Will of the Heavens is expressed. In

other words, a kirin does not have his own intentions; very simply, we pass on the intentions of the Heavens."

Taiki nodded, and Keiki rubbed his head. It was a warm hand. Taiki was also very happy that he could finally receive Keiki's affection now.

"Taiki, you said that you were afraid of Lord Gyousou. I think I can understand the reason for your fear."

"What is it?"

"You shouldn't call that feeling „fear.' It might be more appropriate to call it „awe.'"

"Perhaps..."

"Because, Taiki, you met your destiny. So that's why you felt such awe."

Taiki looked hesitantly at Gyousou. When he saw Gyousou's eyes, he thought that Keiki was probably right about everything.

"Taiki cannot tell a lie. That's just how kirin are--they are a creature who cannot bow to anyone but their own rulers. Thus, you chose the right person for king."

"Yes..."

Keiki looked at the small kirin's deep black eyes. "Had I known earlier, I would have made this more clear. Then you wouldn't have felt such regret. At the time, I should have stayed on Mt. Hou for longer. Had I done that, Taiki wouldn't have been so anxious... I truly am very sorry."

"No! It's my fault for not asking about it earlier."

Keiki heard these very Taiki-like words and couldn't help but smile. "From the bottom of my heart, I offer my congratulations."

"Thank you."

He finally saw Taiki smile.

Keiki turned to look at Gyousou, who was standing close to Taiki. After Keiki passed Taiki's confession to Gyousou, he had not been the least bit distressed,

nor had he looked disappointed. Even more, he had never said anything blaming Taiki. He had just looked sternly at Keiki and asked him if he really was the king.

"I would also like to congratulate King Tai."

"I thank you." Gyousou smiled.

King En also wished Gyousou well. "En offers its congratulations as well."

"Many thanks."

"When will you come for another duel?"

"Do you still remember?"

"How could I forget? Long ago, I lost one fight to you. --At that time, I'd felt that you were an extraordinary person, but who would have thought that after so many years, you'd become a king?"

Gyousou smiled as he said, "Are you still willing to be my opponent?"

"We are colleagues. Shall we set a time?"

"King Tai," interrupted Enki, who was sitting on the banister of the terrace, admiring the view. "By the way, what is that weird thing over there?"

Enki pointed to a pavilion across from the terrace.

King En put on a serious face. "Don't speak so rudely. I'm sorry for his behavior."

Gyousou laughed, showing that he didn't mind. He looked at the youth and said, "That is a remnant left behind by the previous king. I plan to tear it down in order to buy grain to supplement the treasury of the kingdom. King En, do you have a surplus of grain over there?"

"King Tai, you're in luck!" Enki laughed. "In our kingdom, there have been plentiful harvests in these past few years. We're worried that the prices will fall because of this."

Taiki smiled as he watched the others conversing. Keiki jiggled Taiki's hand. "Would you like to take me to your gardens and stroll around? We didn't finish last time I was here."

"Okay. But I really don't know it very well."

The youth that was sitting on the banister jumped down. "Well, then let's go explore!"

Taiki looked up at Gyousou. "May I go?"

"You may. But you must come back in the evening. Though it will be simple, we must still have a banquet tonight for our guests."

"All right."

Keiki extended his hand, and Taiki took it without the slightest bit of hesitation.

"Would you like me to call Hankyo and Jakko out?"

"Can you?" Taiki looked up at Keiki.

Keiki laughed. "We are all kirin, so it doesn't matter. Taiki, call your shirei out as well, and let us see them."

"Yes!"

# Epilogue

"After his majesty sits on the throne, you kowtow to him again. The entire process is just like this."

The Spring Minister continuously reminded Taiki, who then nodded.

"Yes."

The coronation ceremony had finally arrived.

The stage was the main hall of the government, at the foot of Kouki Mountain in the capital city of Kouki.

In front of the main hall there was an expansive square, which was filled with people. The purpose of the coronation ceremony was to announce to the other kingdoms and to the people that a new ruler was ascending to the throne.

After the ceremony started, one could hear cheers coming from the outside. There was no one who wasn't joyous about the enthronement of a new ruler.

The day before, Taiki had left Hakkei Palace for the first time and gone down to the streets of Kouki.

He encountered the attendants whom Gyousou had parted with at Mt. Hou, and who had returned by land route, and of course, he saw Keito, with whom he had traveled with. Other than that, he also met up with Risai, who had come to Kouki for a visit as an aide to the Shukou of Jou Province for the coronation ceremony, as well as Hien.

Risai and Gyousou also took a quick trip around Zui Province.

Taiki was astonished to discover that Kouki Mountain was even taller than he had imagined. He avoided the eyes and ears of the people to wander the streets and saw things as amazing as the waters of the gem springs. From start to finish, everything was completely new to Taiki, as he looked at everything wide-eyed.

"Did you sleep well last night?" asked Gyousou of Taiki, as Taiki's court ladies were helping him straighten out his clothes.

"Yes, because I was so tired, I fell asleep right when I hit the bed."

"Very good."

"I might have been sleeping too well. I've pretty much forgotten all those words of congratulations that I had memorized before..." Taiki said this very candidly, which made Gyousou laugh.

"In any case, I will be the only one who can hear you."

"Or perhaps even Lord Gyousou won't be able to hear me."

Taiki tilted his head to listen to the noise coming from outside. Gyousou did the same, and smiled as he did so.

"You have a point."

-----

He didn't know why, but Taiki couldn't sit calmly in his seat. Thus, he was pacing endlessly in his antechamber, all the while reciting the words the Spring Minister had taught him. He suddenly heard someone calling him.

"Hey, kid!"

Taiki quickly turned his head. "En Taiho!"

The nearby court ladies rushed to bow to Enki. Enki gently waved his hand to stop them.

"I'm here to see my good neighbor."

Gyousou smiled wryly and responded, "Thank you for coming. I am sorry for the inconvenience."

"Yes, thank you, En Taiho. Where's King En?"

"At the banquet for honored guests. He's almost drunk... Are you nervous?"

"A little..." Taiki replied honestly.

Enki's face seemed to say, 'Oh, well!' as he smiled and said, "You really are timid! And you're so small, too."

Gyousou didn't know whether to laugh or cry. "Kouri is still only ten years old."

Enki knitted his brow. "I was curious about this before. Your name is very

interesting."

Taiki blushed a little. "Actually, my name is Kouri, without the grass radical."

"I see..."

"Oh, that's right! I heard that En Taiho was also born in Hourai. What was your name?"

"Rokuta. I don't have a surname, because my status was not high enough."

Taiki tilted his head. It seemed like it had been a long time since everyone had a surname. Could it be that the Kirin of En has lived a long while? "When were you born?"

Enki glanced at the ceiling. "500 years before you!"

"Huh!?"

-----

In the capital, flags fluttered about. To the common people, who were already weary of the extravagance of the previous king, the simple coronation ceremony was even more favorable.

Beside the throne stood a child. His hair color was hard to come by, but because of where he was, it would not be wrong to assume that he was the kirin.

A wise elder explained that Taiki was a black kirin. Though he wasn't clear on what sort of special characteristics a black kirin possessed, he had heard that they were very rare creatures. The people of the square were all filled with pride.

From on top of the platform, Taiki looked down at the thunderous multitude. He was a little bit afraid, and yet there was no feeling of guilt as they gazed upon him, and this made him happy.

Under such great and eager anticipation, Gyousou stepped onto the platform. The square boiled over with cheering and applause.

Gyousou calmly sat upon the throne. Taiki walked towards him and kneeled down.

Without any difficulty, Taiki bowed his head, and pressed his forehead onto

Gyousou's shoes. The thing he wasn't able to do with King En was now exceptionally easy. He didn't feel any sort of discomfort as he carried out his duty. His heart filled with joy.

The tightly packed crowd of people once more rose up in thunderous applause.

--Taiou sokui! King Tai has ascended to the throne!

In Taikyokukoku, the Far Kingdom of Tai, a new dynasty has begun!

-----

In the spring of the twenty-second year of Wagen, the Saiho suffered Shitsudou and thereafter died.

Within a month, the king passed away and was posthumously called Kyouou, the Extravagant King. The Taiou had reigned for one-hundred and twenty-four years, and was interred at Souryou upon Tappisan.

In the first month of the same year, the Ranka of Tai appeared on Houzan. Within a few days, a shoku struck Gozan. The Taika was separated from its branch and disappeared. A hundred shin and a thousand sen searched everywhere for it.

In the first month of the thirty-second year, the Kokki returned to Houzan. Yellow flags fluttered across the world. In the summer, Saku Gyousou entered Koukai by way of the Reikonmon, climbed Houzan, and accepted the oath of Taiki. He was entered into the Shinseki and was then called Taiou.

Gyousou, original surname Boku, given name Sou, was a man of Garyou. He achieved the rank of Kingun Shougun, and was stationed in Sakuken of Zuishu. He received the Will of the Heavens and ascended to the throne. The era of Koushi was proclaimed. The reign of the Sakuou began.

-- *Taishi Sakusho (The History of Tai, Book of Saku)*

# Afterword

I don't know when it started, but there's been a *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* boom... I already said that in the previous volume. I am that Ono who has already written until she doesn't know what else to write, and is afraid of writing afterwords.

After my previous book, *Shadow of the Moon, Sea of the Shadow*, was published, I received a question from many readers: "Could it be that you didn't plan on writing a series?" Thank you very much.

For the time being, I intend to write a series. In addition, there are preparations, and to that extent, with the support of the readers-sama, I will keep writing... If only that were the recent publishing situation. Oh, relentless world...

In brief, I'll try my best to write as much as I can. I also ask everyone for lots of advice.

Since I aim to write a series, I regret that my writing speed is too slow. I've thought about it very carefully. If I were to write a book a month...in an instant, the series would also be completed, and following that, I'd have to start a new story... It's easy to say five books or ten books, but when I work it out, I'll have to spend many years' time. When I think about that, I can only put it aside with a "tohoho." However, for those readers waiting for my next work, I feel so helpless... I will be diligent.

The speed of my writing is already slow; if I didn't have the help of a word processor, the situation would be even more dire. I can't even imagine that. If there were no word processors in the world, I don't think there would have appeared such an author called Ono. So, I must really thank our home's old-boned 98-kun (also called Zorac-kun) that I still whip around, and the support it gives me. That's right, the Zorac we have at home is already an old soldier. We often think about getting a newer, faster machine, but because I've saved so many definitions in the old machine, this isn't a problem that can be solved with a new computer and new software. For instance, when I type 'kuji' for the 'nine

words,' it will appear as 'Rin Byou Tou Sha Kai Jin Retsu Zai Zen' instead of 'Rin Byou Tou Sha Kai Jin Retsu Zen Kyou.' And if I take into account the fact that this story is a series, the more I write, the more strange words will be added. I wonder how many megabytes the dictionary will be a year from now...

Hmmm...

Since I wrote the previous book, I often hear people saying, "Even the second standard set of kanji aren't enough to use." But JIS-2 unexpectedly served its purpose. Just when I was praising its performance, for the first time there was a character that couldn't be found in the second standard set of kanji. Just thinking about simply organizing the already enormous dictionary and then all the words that I've added, makes my head spin.

...If I keep talking like this, people are going to think that I'm a computer otaku. I should say first that I am definitely not a person with extensive knowledge. I may want to be an otaku, but I just don't have enough time. Just dealing with the word processor on the Zorac (with its attached communications function) already keeps me busy. I'm very, very sorry.

Oh, yes, speaking of communications, I should talk about the SF forum at NIF. Thanks for the encouragement you guys gave me last year. When the vote for the best was going on, you guys especially wrote a commentary that made a timid person like me speechless. In my own consistent way of doing things, I very gratefully received the responses in the conference hall. I must take this opportunity to extend my gratitude to you. Thank you very, very much!

Oh my, in the end, this afterword has turned into miscellany that has nothing to do with the work it follows.

Honestly, I don't really like saying this and that about my own work. I always feel like, no matter how I say it, everything turns out sounding like an excuse. So, I think I'll wait and be ready for everyone's impressions. Even if it's just a little bit, I'll be happy.

*Fuyumi Ono*

# Glossary

## Ankoujitsu 安闇日【あんこうじつ】

Falling upon the solstices and equinoxes, the day when a gate into the Yellow Sea opens.

## Bakou 馬候【ばこう】

The [Shuukou](#) of Ba Province.

## Bashuu 馬州【ばしゆう】

Ba Province. A province in Tai Kingdom.

## Boku 朴【ぼく】

[Gyousou](#)'s original surname.

## chisen 地仙【ちせん】

An earthly immortal. A class of immortals who are given their positions in the Immortal Register by a ruler.

## Chougi 朝議【ちょうぎ】

Morning Council.

## Daibu 大夫【だいぶ】

An officer.

## Daishi 大師【だいし】

The head of the palace musicians.

## Eki 易【えき】

Divination.

## Enki 延麒【えんき】

The [Kirin](#) of En Kingdom.

## Enkoku 雁国【えんこく】

The Kingdom of En. A kingdom towards the northeast. [\[map\]](#)

## Enou 延王【えんおう】

The Ruler of En Kingdom.

## En Taiho 延台輔【えんたいほ】

[Enki](#)'s title.

## Fuusui 風水【ふうすい】

Geomancy.

## Gaiden 外殿【がいでん】

The Outer Halls. The outer palace halls in Hakkei Palace where government business is handled.

## Garyou 呀嶺【がりょう】

A place name in Tai Kingdom. [Gyousou's birthplace](#).

## Genbu 玄武【げんぶ】

The Ebony Warrior. A giant turtle that carries newly ascended rulers and their respective kirin to their home kingdom.

## Genkun 玄君【げんくん】

What the [nyosen](#) call [Gyokuyou](#).

## geshi 夏至【げし】

The summer solstice.

## Godoukyuu 梧桐宮【ごどうきゅう】

Godou Palace. A palace [in Gyouten](#).

## Gogou no Mon 吳剛の門【ごごうのもん】

The Gogou Gate. A gate between the world of the Twelve Kingdoms and [Hourai](#).

## Goson 酷孫【ごそん】

The [Shikou Daibu](#) of [the Bakou](#) in Tai Kingdom.

**Gouran** 傲濫【ごうらん】

One [of Taiki's shirei.](#) A toutetsu.

**Gozan** 五山【ござん】

The Five Mountains. Mountains that lie in the center of the Yellow Sea. [\[map\]](#)

**gyoku** 玉【ぎょく】

Gem.

**gyokusen** 玉泉【ぎょくせん】

Gem spring.

**Gyokuyou** 玉葉【ぎょくよう】

The leader of [the nyosen.](#)

**Gyousou** 驍宗【ぎょうそう】

General Saku of the Tai King[dom Kingun.](#)

**Gyouten** 堯天【ぎょうてん】

The capital city of Kei Kingdom.

**Hakkai** 白海【はっかい】

The White Sea. The sea west of the Yellow Sea. [\[map\]](#)

**Hakke** 八卦【はっけ】

The Eight Diagrams.

**Hakkeikyuu** 白圭宮【はっけいきゅう】

Hakkei Palace. The palace of the [Taiou inKouki.](#)

**Hakkikyuu** 白龜宮【はっききゅう】

Hakki Palace. A small palace on Mt. Hou.

**Hakuchi** 白雉【はくち】

The White Pheasant.

**Haku Sanshi** 白汕子【はくさんし】

[Taiki' s nyokai.](#)

**Hankoku** 範国【はんこく】

The Kingdom of Han. A kingdom in the west. [\[map\]](#)

**Hankyo** 班渠【はんきょ】

One [of Keiki' s shirei.](#)

**Hien** 飛燕【ひえん】

[A tenba](#) that is [Risai' s kijuu.](#)

**hisen** 飛仙【ひせん】

A flying immortal. A class of immortals who are not appointed by nor serve under a ruler.

**hiso** 飛鼠【ひそ】

A rabbit-like [youma.](#)

**Hotokyuu** 甫渡宮【ほときゅう】

Hoto Palace. A small palace on Mt. Hou outside of Houro Palace.

**Hou** 鳳【ほう】

The Male Phoenix.

**Hougyo** 崩御【ほうぎょ】

Royal Death. The White Pheasant's Second Sound.

**Houkoku** 芳国【ほうこく】

The Kingdom of Hou. A kingdom in the northwest. [\[map\]](#)

**Hourai** 蓬萊【ほうらい】

What the people of the Twelve Kingdoms call Japan.

**Houroguu** 蓬盧宮【ほうろぐう】

Houro Palace. A palace compound situated halfway up Mt. Hou.

**Houzan** 蓬山【ほうざんこう】

Mt. Hou. One of the Five Mountains. Used to be called Mt. Tai. [\[map\]](#)

**Houzankou** 蓬山公【ほうざんこう】

The [Kou](#) of Mt. Hou. Another way to refer to [kirin](#).

**Issei** 一声【いっせい】

First Sound. The first call of the White Pheasant.

**Jakko** 雀胡【じやっこ】

[A hiso](#) subdued by [Keiki](#).

**Jinjuuden** 仁重殿【じんじゅうでん】

Jinju Hall. A hall in Hakkei Palace where [Taiki](#) lives.

**Jokaku** 舒覚【じょかく】

The Queen of Kei during Taiki's stay upon Mt. Hou.

**Joushuu** 承州【じょうしゅう】

Jou Province. A province in Tai Kingdom.

**jumon** 呪文【じゅもん】

Incantation.

**Kabocha Daibu** 南瓜大夫【かぼちゃだいぶ】

Pumpkin Daibu. The nickname that the [nyosen](#) gave to [Rohaku](#).

**Kaidouguu** 海桐宮【かいどうぐう】

Kaidou Palace. A small palace on Mt. Hou situated near Kaidou Spring.

**Kaidousen** 海桐泉【かいどうせん】

Kaidou Spring. A small spring on Mt. Hou, situated beside a great sea paulownia (kaidou) tree.

**Kakuzan** 霍山【かくざん】

Mt. Kaku. One of the Five Mountains. [\[map\]](#)

**Kazan** 華山【かざん】

Mt. Ka. One of the Five Mountains. [\[map\]](#)

## **Keiki 景麒【けいき】**

The [Kirin](#) of Kei Kingdom.

## **Keikoku 慶国【けいこく】**

The Kingdom of Kei. A kingdom in the [east](#). [\[map\]](#)

## **Keiou 景王【けいおう】**

The Ruler of Kei Kingdom.

## **Kei Taiho 景台輔【けいたいほ】**

[Keiki](#)'s title.

## **Keito 計都【けいと】**

[A suugu](#) that is [Gyousou](#)'s [kijuu](#).

## **ken 県【けん】**

A district.

## **Ken'in 剣印【けんいん】**

The Sword Seal. A seal stance used in conjunction with the Nine-Word Mantra.

## **ki 気【き】**

Spirit.

## **kijuu 騎獸【きじゅう】**

[A youjuu](#) that has been trained to be ridden upon.

## **Kingun 禁軍【きんぐん】**

The military that belongs solely under the control of the ruler.

## **Kinpakyuu 金波宮【きんぱきゅう】**

Kinpa Palace. The palace of the [Keiou inGyouten](#).

## **kirin 麒麟【きりん】**

A divine beast that chooses the ruler for his country and then serves under him.

## **Kirinki 麒麟旗【きりんき】**

The Kirin Flag. A flag that is raised to notify the people that their kirin is ready to choose a ruler.

## **Kokkai 黒海【こっかい】**

The Black Sea. The sea north of the Yellow Sea. [\[map\]](#)

## **kokki 黒麒【こっき】**

A black [kirin](#).

## **ku [koku](#) 国【こく】**

A kingdom.

## **kokushi 国氏【こくし】**

The clan name of a kingdom that is applied when referring to the current [kirin](#) or ruler.

## **Kongouzan 金剛山【こんごうざん】**

The Kongou Mountains. The range of mountains that lines the perimeter of the Yellow Sea. [\[map\]](#)

## **Konron 崑崙【こんろん】**

What the people of the Twelve Kingdoms call China.

## **Kou 公【こう】**

[A kirin's status](#).

## **Kou 候【こう】**

[A shuukou's status](#).

## **Koukai 黃海【こうかい】**

The Yellow Sea. [\[map\]](#)

## **Kouki 鴻基【こうき】**

The capital city of Tai Kingdom.

## **Koukisan** 鴻基山【こうきさん】

The mountain in [Kouki](#) upon which the royal palace of Tai Kingdom sits.

## **Koukoku** 巧国【こうこく】

The Kingdom of Kou. A kingdom towards the southeast. [\[map\]](#)

## **Kouri** 蒿里【こうり】

A peak upon Mt. Hou where it is said the souls of the dead reside. also: A name Gyousou calls Taiki by.

## **Koushi** 叩歯【こうし】

A way of biting used to [avoid youma](#).

## **Koushi** 弘始【こうし】

The name given to a period of Tai history.

## **Kouzan** 恒山【こうざん】

Mt. Kou. One of the Five Mountains. [\[map\]](#)

## **Kujijugon** 九字呪言【くじじゅごん】

The Nine-Word Mantra: [Rin Byou Tou Sha Kai Jin Retsu Zen Gyou](#).

## **Kyokai** 虚海【きょかい】

The Empty Sea. A sea that surrounds the world of the Twelve Kingdoms.

## **Kyoukoku** 恭国【きょうこく】

The Kingdom of Kyou. A kingdom towards the northwest. [\[map\]](#)

## **Kyouou** 騷王【きょうおう】

The Extravagant King. The posthumous name for the most recently deceased King of Tai Kingdom. [note: kyou also has the meaning of pride, arrogance, etc.]

## **Massei** 末声【まっせい】

Ending Sound. Another name for the second call of the White Pheasant.

## **Meitenko** 鳴天鼓【めいてんこ】

The sounding of the front teeth in order to concentrate one's spirit.

## **Naiden** 内殿【ないでん】

The Inner Halls. The inner palace halls in Hakkei Palace where the king lives.

## **nin'you** 人妖【にんよう】

Another name for [youjin](#).

## **Nisei** 二声【にせい】

Second Sound. The second call of the White Pheasant. also: Two-Sounds.

Another name for the White Pheasant.

## **Niseikyuu** 二声宮【にせいきゅう】

Nisei Palace. A small palace at [Kouki](#).

## **nyokai** 女怪【によかい】

A female [youjin](#) that takes care of a [kirin](#).

## **nyosen** 女仙【によせん】

A female immortal that lives on Mt. Hou and takes care of [f](#) [kirin](#).

## **nyoshin** 女神【によかしん】

A goddess.

## **Onmyou** 陰陽【おんみよう】

The Light and the Dark.

## **Ou** 王【おう】

A ruler.

## **Ou** 凰【おう】

The Female Phoenix.

## **Oubo** 王母【おうぼ】

[Seiouro](#).

## **Oufujin** 王夫人【おうふじん】

A goddess who watches over Mt. Hou.

## ouki 王氣【おうき】

A spirit of a ruler.

## oukyuu 王宮【おうきゅう】

The royal palace.

## Oushi 王師【おうし】

The Royal Army, also called [Rokushi](#).

## ranka 卵果【らんか】

An "egg-fruit" from which all living things in the world of the Twelve Kingdoms are hatched.

## Reigonmon 令艮門【れいごんもん】

The Reigon Gate. The northeastern gate into the Yellow Sea. [\[map\]](#)

## Reikenmon 令乾門【れいけんもん】

The Reiken Gate. The northwestern gate into the Yellow Sea. [\[map\]](#)

## Reikonmon 令坤門【れいこんもん】

The Reikon Gate. The southwestern gate into the Yellow Sea. [\[map\]](#)

## Reisonmon 令巽門【れいそんもん】

The Reison Gate. The southeastern gate into the Yellow Sea. [\[map\]](#)

## Renkoku 漣国【れんこく】

The Kingdom of Ren. A kingdom in the southwest. [\[map\]](#)

## Renrin 廉麟【れんりん】

The [Kirin](#) of Ren Kingdom.

## Ren Taiho 廉台輔【れんたいほ】

[Renrin](#)'s title.

**Rin Byou Tou Sha Kai Jin Retsu Zen Gyou** 臨兵闘者皆陳烈前行【りんびょうとうしゃかいちんれつぜんぎょう】

The Nine-Word Mantra.

## Risai 李齋【りさい】

The General of the Jou Provincial Army in Tai Kingdom.

## Rohaku 呂迫【ろはく】

The [Shiba](#) of Sui Province in Tai Kingdom.

## Rokkan 六官【ろっかん】

The Six Ministers.

## Rokushi 六師【ろくし】

The Six Armies, also called [Oushi](#).

## Rokuta 六太【ろくた】

[Enki](#)'s name when he lived in [Hourai](#).

## Rosenkyuu 露茜宮【ろせんきゅう】

Rosen Palace. A small palace on Mt. Hou in which [Taiki](#) lives.

## Ryuukoku 柳国【りゅうこく】

The Kingdom of Ryu. A kingdom in the north. [\[map\]](#)

## Ryuukyuu 竜宮【りゅうきゅう】

The Dragon Palace. At the bottom of the Yellow Sea.

## Ryuushi 劉紫【りゅうし】

[Risai](#)'s given name.

## Sakuken 乍県【さくけん】

Saku District. A district in Zui Province of Tai Kingdom.

## Sakuou 乍王【さくおう】

King [Saku](#). [Gyousou](#).

## Saiho 宰輔【さいほ】

[A kirin's position in government](#).

## **Saikoku 才国【さいこく】**

The Kingdom of Sai. A kingdom towards the southwest. [\[map\]](#)

## **Sairin 斎麟【さいりん】**

The [Kirin](#) of Sai Kingdom.

## **Saishou 宰相【さいしょう】**

Prime Minister. The [Kirin](#) of a kingdom.

## **Saku Shougun 乍將軍【さくしょうぐん】**

General [Saku](#). [Gyousou](#)'s title.

## **Seikai 青海【せいかい】**

The Blue Sea. The sea east of the Yellow Sea. [\[map\]](#)

## **seiki 生氣【せいき】**

The spirit of life.

## **Seioubo 西王母【せいおうぼ】**

The Queen Mother of the West. A goddess who watches over the Five Mountains.

## **Sekkai 赤海【せっかい】**

The Red Sea. The sea south of the Yellow Sea. [\[map\]](#)

## **sen 仙【せん】**

An immortal.

## **sennin 仙人【せんにん】**

An immortal.

## **Senseki 仙籍【せんせき】**

The Immortal Register. A register to which people who become immortals belong.

## **sensui 仙水【せんすい】**

Water of the Immortals. Water from Mt. Hou that eases pain and promotes

healing.

## **shakubuku 折伏【しゃくぶく】**

Subdue.

## **Shashinboku 捨身木【しゃしんぼく】**

The tree on Mt. Hou that bears the [ranka](#) of [kirin](#).

## **Shiba 司馬【しば】**

A war official.

## **shiki 死氣【しき】**

The spirit of death.

## **Shikou 司寇【しこう】**

A justice official.

## **shin 神【しん】**

A god.

**Shinchoku Meichoku, Tensei Chisei Jinkun Seikun, Fuo Fudaku Kimi Koubuku, Onmyou Wagou Kyuukyuu Nyo Ritsurei**【神しじき勅ん神鬼み急ゆ明ち君く魅こ急う勅よ清ん降う如き、く君せ伏ぶ律ゆ天め、いく令う清い不く陰お。に地ち汚ん陽よ清よ不ふ和みり。濁合くおよつて。ふ。うれんだわいせくごい】

An incantation.

## **shinjuu 神獸【しんじゅう】**

A divine beast.

## **shinseki 神籍【しんせき】**

The Divine Register. A register to which rulers and [kirin](#) belong.

## **shinsen 神仙【しんせん】**

A divine immortal. The class of immortals that includes rulers and [kirin](#).

## **shirei 使令【しれい】**

[A youma](#) subdued by and in the service of a [kirin](#).

## **Shirendou** 紫蓮洞【しれんどう】

Shiren Cave. A cave near [Shiren Palace](#) on Mt. Hou from which springwater flows.

## **Shirenkyuu** 紫蓮宮【しれんきゅう】

Shiren Palace. A small palace in which [Keiki](#) had lived when he was residing on Mt. Hou.

## **Shitsudou** 失道【しつどう】

A sickness that kirin suffer when their rulers lose their way.

## **Shougun** 将軍【しょうぐん】

A general.

## **shoku** 蝕【しょく】

A great storm.

## **shousen** 昇仙【じょうせん】

One on their way to becoming an immortal.

## **shunbun** 春分【しゅんぶん】

The spring equinox.

## **Shunkan** 春官【しゅんかん】

The Spring Administration. One of six government administrations. Manages ritual and ceremony.

## **Shunkanchou** 春官長【しゅんかんちょう】

The Spring Minister. Head of the [Shunkan](#). One of [theRokukan](#). Oversees ritual and ceremony.

## **Shunkoku** 舜国【しゅんこく】

The Kingdom of Shun. A kingdom in the southeast. [\[map\]](#)

## **shuu** 州【しゅう】

A province.

## **Shuukou** 州候【しゅうこう】

The governor of a province.

## **Shuukoushi** 州候師【しゅうこうし】

The Army of the Provincial [Kou](#), the longer form of [Shuushi](#).

## **Shuushi** 州師【しゅうし】

The Provincial Army, the shorter form of [Shuukoushi](#).

## **Sokui** 即位【そくい】

Enthronement. The White Pheasant's First Sound.

## **Sou** 総【そう】

[Gyousou](#)'s given name.

## **Soukoku** 奏国【そうこく】

The Kingdom of Sou. A kingdom in [the south](#). [\[map\]](#)

## **Souou** 宗王【そうおう】

The Ruler of Sou Kingdom.

## **Souryou** 桑陵【そうりょう】

[Sou Tomb](#). Kyouou's tomb on Mt. Tappi.

## **Suishuu** 垂州【すいしゅう】

Sui Province. A province in Tai Kingdom.

## **suugu** 驒虞【すうぐ】

[A youjuu](#) that resembles a tiger.

## **Suukou** 崇高【すうこう】

High Su. Another name for Mt. Su.

## **Suuzan** 崇山【すうざん】

Mt. Su. One of the Five Mountains. Also called High [Su](#). [\[map\]](#)

**Suzaku** 朱雀【すざく】

The Crimson Bird.

**Taiho** 台輔【たいほ】

A kirin's title.

**Taika** 泰果【たいか】

Taiki' s ranka.

**taika** 胎果【たいか】

A ranka that has been carried away by a shoku to another world and becomes a "womb-fruit."

**Taiki** 泰麒【たいき】

The Kirin of Tai Kingdom.

**Taikoku** 戴国【たいこく】

The Kingdom of Tai. A kingdom in the northeast. [\[map\]](#)

**Taikyokukoku** 戴極国【たいきょくこく】

The Far Kingdom of Tai. Another name for Tai Kingdom. [\[map\]](#)

**Taiou** 泰王【たいおう】

The Ruler of Tai Kingdom.

**Taishinbyou** 大真廟【たいしんびょう】

Taishin Shrine. A shrine on Mt. Hou dedicated to Oufujin.

**Taishi Sakusho** 戴史乍書【たいしさくしょ】

The History of Tai, Book of Saku.

**Tai Taiho** 泰台輔【たいたいほ】

Taiki' s title after he chooses a ruler.

**Taizan** 泰山【たいざん】

Mt. Tai. The ancient name for Mt. Hou.

**Takasato Kaname** 高里 要【たかさとかなめ】

Taiki' s name when he lived in Hourai.

**Tankeikyuu** 丹桂宮【たんけいきゅう】

Tankei Palace. A small palace on Mt. Hou where Gyousou stays temporarily.

**Tappisan** 托飛山【たっぴさん】

Mt. Tappi. Where Kyouou's tomb, Souryou, is located.

**Teiei** 禎衛【ていえい】

The oldest nyosen at Houro Palace.

**tenba** 天馬【てんば】

A youjuu that resembles a dog with wings.

**Tenchoku** 天勅【てんちょく】

The Heavenly Decree.

**tenkei** 天啓【てんけい】

Revelation.

**tenpen** 転変【てんぺん】

Transformation.

**Tensen Gyokujo Hekika Genkun** 天仙玉女碧霞玄君【てんせんぎょくじょへきかげんくん】

Gyokuyou' s title.

**Tenshi** 天子【てんし】

Son of Heaven. The King of a kingdom.

**Tentei** 天帝【てんてい】

The Emperor of the Heavens.

**Tonkou** 遁甲【とんこう】

Sorcery.

**toutetsu** 養餐【とうてつ】

An extremely powerful [youma](#).

**Tsuitenban** 槌天盤【ついてんばん】

A [Koushi](#) that involves biting down on the right side of one's jaw.

**Uho** 禹步【うほ】

A way of walking used [to avoid youma](#).

**Unteikyuu** 雲梯宮【うんていきゅう】

Untei Palace. A small palace on Mt. Hou at the base of a cliff.

**Wagen** 和元【わけん】

The name given to a period of Tai history.

**youjin** 妖人【ようじん】

A magical creature that is a cross between a human and a [youjuu](#).

**youjuu** 妖獸【ようじゅう】

A magical beast.

**Youka** 蓉可【ようか】

One of the younger [nyosen](#) at Houro Palace.

**youma** 妖魔【ようま】

A malevolent magical beast.

**Zuishuu** 瑞州【ずいしゅう】

Zui Province. A province in Tai Kingdom where the capital [Kouki](#) is located.